

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Analysis of Japan's state persecution of FFWPU, a religious minority

Knut Holdhus
February 6, 2025



Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett speaking at a special sponsored dinner at the [IRF Summit](#) in Washington DC February 5, 2025

Authoritative analysis of Japan's state persecution of religious minority by former chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom



The panel of speakers at a special sponsored dinner at the [IRF Summit](#) in Washington DC 5th February 2025, from left: Dr. Marco Respinti, director-in-charge of Bitter Winter; Norishige Kondo, Deputy Director of Legal affairs of the [Family Federation](#) of Japan; Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama from Japan; Katrina Lantos Swett, former chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom; Attorney Patricia Duval, expert on international human rights law

Remarks by Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, Summit co-chair and president of the Lantos foundation for Human Rights and Justice and past chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. The remarks were made as answers to questions from Dr. Marco Respinti, moderator of a panel of speakers at a special sponsored dinner 5th February at the [IRF Summit 2025](#) in Washington DC.



Logo of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit 2025
Question: Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, in 2022 in the [Real Clear Politics magazine](#), you wrote that Japan, which has been a beacon of democracy and protection of human rights for several decades, is flirting with the idea of trampling on religious freedom in a move that is much more reminiscent of practices in Russia and China. Japan's government now threatens to dissolve a legally constituted religious group for seemingly political reasons.

[...] You also added, dissolving a religious organization that has not been found guilty of any crime would taint the image of Japan as a country committed to democratic principles. Will you elaborate on that comment and share your thoughts?

Lantos Swett: Absolutely! It's deeply disturbing what Japan is contemplating doing. And if they go forward with this, it will be an enormous stain on Japan's claim to being a liberal constitutional democracy.

If they were attempting to do that in this country, they would be laughed out of court. It would be so clearly and uncontestably unconstitutional.

And really, if we look at the protections for fundamental religious freedom that Japan has supposedly signed on to, supposedly enshrined in its law, it really should be seen as unlawful in the Japanese context as well.



Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House of Representatives in the American Congress 1995-1999, here delivering a video message to the IRF Summit in Washington DC Feb. 5, 2025

And what we find is this pattern of twisting laws around fraud, which you referred to, to try and create a crime that does not exist, to try and create a basis for prosecution that is entirely manufactured.

It is not only incredibly unfair to this [community](#), this wonderful [faith community](#) that actually has been a boon and a blessing to Japanese society, but it is deeply undermining of the pillars of what Japan, modern Japan, is supposed to stand for. So I find it very concerning.

I appreciated the remarks from former speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, citing all of the respected international voices that have spoken out against this, from the United Nations to the Biden administration.

And I echo his hope that the Trump administration, which we expect to be very, very strongly pro-religious freedom, is going to use its leverage to let Japan know, "Don't do this!"

A few years ago when we had a discussion about this, I said that friends don't let friends drive drunk. And on this issue, Japan is driving its legal and constitutional vehicle right off a cliff. And we hope that they'll pull back onto the road before they make a huge error. [...]



Dr. Marco Respinti moderating a panel of speakers at a special sponsored dinner at the [IRF Summit](#) in Washington DC February 5, 2025

Question: [...] We heard that the United Nations Rapporteurs on human rights and religious freedom [issued a mandate](#) to Japan expressing concern that the country is violating the religious freedom. It's very important for the Jehovah's Witnesses and the [Family Federation](#). [...] Yet, this mandate seems not to have affected the government in Japan. I would really like to hear your comment on that.

Lantos Swett: It is outrageous, and it is, I think, an example of what we would in this country call weaponization of the law, weaponization of justice, weaponization of the media.

It is a kind of despicable picking of a target that the powers that be think they can get away with scapegoating, with marginalizing, and with ultimately destroying.

And it is a really an awful reflection on Japan's commitment to some of the most fundamental values that underlie a strong and democratic society - the rule of law, equal treatment under the law, not weaponizing the government against a community they think

they can whip up anger towards.

Those should be the crown jewels of a country. And yet in Japan, we see a willingness to abandon all of this in this single-minded desire to attack a faith community.

You say they haven't responded to some of the pressure that's been brought to bear upon them. I think that's very, very unfortunate.

We are, as all of us know, still in the opening days of a new administration here in this country, and it's been something of a tornado of activity.

I think we're all trying to catch our breath because things have been happening in a fast and furious way. But one of the things I think that the new Trump administration is demonstrating is what it looks like

when the United States uses its leverage in a maximum way to try and achieve a policy goal.



President Donald Trump signing executive order on day one of his presidency, January 20, 2025

It isn't always diplomatic, it isn't always in accordance with the traditional norms that we're used to, but it has the potential to yield some results.

And as someone who is passionate about international religious freedom, somebody who of course has admiration for Japan in so many ways but wants to see Japan pull back from this cliff and get back on the right track, I hope that perhaps the new Trump administration will exert some of that tough leverage with Japan on behalf of religious freedom.

We'll say very simply, if this was happening in

our country - and Japan's legal system, constitutional system, embrace of democratic norms and international human rights are not that different from what we have here in this country - again, they would be laughed out of court. Some of these practices seem more like suborning perjury [See editor's note below] or a bill of attainder [See editor's note below].



On Feb. 5, 2025, at the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit held in Washington, D.C., a declaration calling for Japan to uphold religious freedom was signed by religious leaders, lawyers and politicians

For our members of the audience who don't know what that is, you can't, under the U.S. constitution, write, draft a law that is specifically targeted to entrap and attack and accuse and imprison and convict one individual or one group. That's not lawful. That's not the way a democracy functions.

And so, Japan is straying into some very dangerous territory, and ultimately most dangerous for Japan itself.

It does not want to lose its ability to count itself among those countries that stand for the rule of law, that stand for religious freedom, that stand for equal treatment under the law.

So, we're waiting to see who the Trump administration will appoint as the ambassador at large for religious freedom.

We are going to hear from Vice President Vance tomorrow at the summit, which is very exciting.

And I think friends of the [Family Federation](#), but more importantly, friends of religious liberty globally, need to reach out to the administration and say,

"This is wrong! Japan's a friend. Japan's an ally. We can help them do better."

And maybe it'll take a little tough love from America to help that happen.

[Editor's note: To suborn perjury means to persuade, induce, or coerce someone to commit perjury - that is, to lie under oath in a legal proceeding. This is a criminal offense because it obstructs justice and undermines the integrity of the judicial system.

For example, if a lawyer or defendant convinces a witness to falsely testify in court, that would be suborning perjury. In many jurisdictions, this crime carries serious penalties, including fines and

imprisonment.]

[Editor's note: A bill of attainder is a law that declares a person or group guilty of a crime and imposes punishment without a trial. These laws bypass the judicial system, denying individuals due process.

The U.S. Constitution explicitly prohibits bills of attainder at both the federal (Article I, Section 9) and state (Article I, Section 10) levels, ensuring that punishment can only be imposed through fair legal proceedings.

Historically, bills of attainder were used by monarchs and legislatures to punish political enemies without a trial, which is why they are now considered a violation of fundamental rights.]

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sometimes for years, until they would recant their faith.

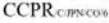
Some professional deprogrammers would step in during confinement to forcefully persuade the believers that the **Unification Church** beliefs were contrary to the Bible. This practice, which reminds us of heresy trials and persecutions, was done with a tacit approval and refusal to intervene from the authorities, be it police or judiciary.

Around **4,300 believers** were subjected to deprogramming over 40 years in Japan.

After being



United Nations



CCPR

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Human Rights Committee

Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Japan*

From header of UN document with United Nations' recommendations to Japan on human rights of believers.

Distr.: General

20 August 2014

Original: English

requested by the *United Nations Human Rights Committee* in 2014 to put an end to this practice, Japan pursued its fight against the **church** in a reinvented form.

The fruits of deprogramming are now being harvested by state authorities through the accumulation of tort cases **[Editor's note: civil court cases]** initiated by deprogrammed members against the **church** to reach the final goal of its dissolution.

Who made all that happen? The *Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales*, an association of far left and atheistic activist lawyers with a stated purpose of eliminating the **Unification Church** due to its early stance against communism.



Those lawyers who were

Deprogramming: Young believer being abducted in order to have his faith broken. Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 10th August 2024.

sometime advising families to resort to deprogramming in the first place, incited the members – who finally recanted their faith – and their families to sue the **church** for damages.

With their reasoning based on **consumer law**, they persuaded the courts to consider religious donations as commercial matters and the soliciting of donations as “evangelical brainwashing”.

Following the shooting of Prime Minister Abe in July 2022 by a man who resented Abe’s sympathy for the **church**, scapegoating and hate speech flourished in the media.

Riding this wave, the government **filed for dissolution** of the **church**, alleging that it had caused “serious harm to public welfare” due to the **various tort cases** it had lost. In all these adverse tort rulings, the courts based their decisions on an alleged violation of social norms.

But what are social norms in the area of religious beliefs and practices in a country where materialistic and atheistic lobbies are at work?

Well, the social norms in Japan today include official guidelines issued for the protection of children and mention that making a child participate to religious activities is a form of child abuse.

Alerted by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, four UN **Special Rapporteurs** have issued an open letter to the Japanese authorities to express their concern about those guidelines.



Now, based on **tort cases**, the Japanese

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authorities tight for the dissolution of the church, accusing it of having seriously harmed public welfare. But the UN Human Rights Committee has consistently urged Japan to stop using public welfare as a justification to limit freedom of religion or belief.

The government went further to enact a new law to criminalize so-called "unjust solicitation of donations". It sanctions the vague and arbitrary concept of "infringement of free will".

This law has been announced as being especially designed for the Unification Church, but it could undoubtedly be applied against other targeted denominations in the future.

Now this situation needs urgent attention. Japan is a beautiful and liberal country, but it needs to be reminded of its commitments to respect freedom of religion or belief.

Thank you for your attention.

Featured image above: Patricia Duval speaking at the IRF Summit in Washington DC 5th February 2025. Photo: Screenshot from live transmission



One of the UN Special Rapporteurs who sent formal UN request to Japan, without getting a reply: Nazila Ghanea, UN Rapporteur on Religious Freedom since February 2023. Here, visiting Oslo 22nd August 2023. Photo: Steinar Murud. Published with permission

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