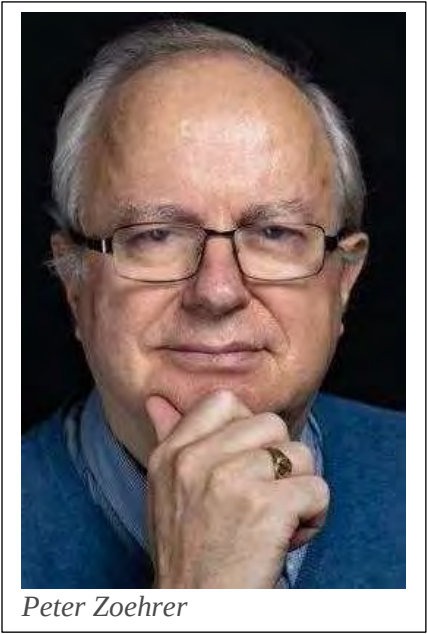


FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Peter Zoehrer on After the N-Word: Is *Cult* Next Term to Be Banned?

Knut Holdhus
June 4, 2025



A demonstration organized by the [Family Federation](#) in the Japanese city of Koriyama May 24, 2025, against religious persecution



Peter Zoehrer

Words kill: Religious freedom journalist calls us to reject religious slurs like the word "cult", just like society has largely removed racial slurs like the "n-word"

The Fragile Balance of Press Freedom and Religious Liberty

High Time to Challenge the Cult Narrative

Part 3 (final) of an article by Peter Zoehrer, journalist and Executive Director of [FOREF Europe](#), [originally published](#) 7th May 2025 by [Forum for Religious Freedom](#) Europe (FOREF), [republished](#) 9th May 2025 by [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), and by [Bitter Winter](#) on [16th May 2025](#).

See part 1: [Media: Harmful Impact of Stigmatizing Language](#)

See part 2: [Media as Weapon: Deadly Echoes of Bias on Air](#)

A digital age of echo chambers - and resistance

In our hyper-connected world, disinformation spreads fast - and stigma spreads faster.



Archway built on the occasion of the major annual Hindu religious festival Durga Puja in October 2024 in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, a false social media post about a Quran desecration during Durga Puja in 2021 triggered deadly riots. The line between rumor and journalism collapses quickly.

Yet resistance is growing. Platforms like "[Bitter Winter](#)", [FOREF Europe](#), [CESNUR](#), [HRWE](#), and independent scholars continue to challenge false narratives, document abuse, and defend conscience.

Courts are taking note. In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in "Tonchev v. Bulgaria" that derogatory language by public authorities can violate religious freedom under Article 9 of the ECHR.

Recommendations

To safeguard both freedom of the press and freedom of religion or belief, the following actions are urgently needed:

Eliminate stigmatizing language such as "cult" or "Sekte," unless supported by objective, legal

evidence. Just as society has largely removed racial slurs like the "N-word" from responsible discourse, we must also reject religious slurs that [dehumanize](#) entire communities. Use accurate, neutral terms such as "faith community" or "new religious movement."

Provide training for journalists on FoRB [Freedom of Religion or Belief] principles, religious literacy, and cultural sensitivity to prevent the spread of harmful stereotypes.

Ensure media accountability through ombudspersons, independent press councils, and public responses to unbalanced or defamatory content.

Support independent journalism and watchdog organizations that uphold both press freedom and the rights of religious minorities.

Urge governments and international bodies to refrain from adopting or promoting anti-cult narratives that violate international human rights norms.



Sent formal UN request to Japan, but no reply: Nazila Ghanea, UN Rapporteur on Religious Freedom since February 2023

As UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Nazila Ghanea warned in 2023, "direct violence against marginalized religious communities often goes hand in hand with legally mandated discrimination" - much of it fueled by biased media.

Conclusion: A test of integrity

World Press Freedom Day is more than a tribute - it is a test. Will the press stand with the voiceless, or with the mob? Will it defend Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR - or betray them in pursuit of sensationalism and scapegoats?

In this fragile global moment, integrity matters more than ever. We must demand a journalism rooted in truth, not tribalism; in context, not caricature. Only then can freedom of expression and freedom of belief coexist - not in conflict, but in common cause for justice.

See part 1: [Media: Harmful Impact of Stigmatizing Language](#)

See part 2: [Media as Weapon: Deadly Echoes of Bias on Air](#)

Peter Zoehrer is a journalist and the Executive Director of [FOREF Europe](#) (Forum for Religious Freedom - Europe), an independent Vienna-based NGO advocating for religious liberty, pluralism, and the protection of conscience across Europe and beyond.

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Media As Weapon: Deadly Echoes Of Bias On Air

• May 25, 2025

• Knut Holdhus



From Myanmar to Japan: How media as weapon in narrative wars fuels global persecution through distorted stories, turning media from watchdog to attack dog

The Fragile Balance of Press Freedom and Religious Liberty

The Dangerous Power of a Distorted Press



Part 2 of an article by Peter Zoehrer, journalist and Executive Director of [FOREF Europe](#), originally published 7th May 2025 by [Forum for Religious Freedom Europe \(FOREF\)](#), republished 9th May 2025 by [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), and by [Bitter Winter](#) on 16th

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Peter Zoehrer.
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Global consequences: Media as an accelerant

The consequences of distorted media narratives are felt worldwide – and are often deadly.

In Myanmar, anti-Muslim rhetoric helped lay the groundwork for the Rohingya genocide. In Pakistan, media-fueled accusations of heresy against Ahmadi Muslims often end in mob violence.

China: Media-driven cultural genocide



Falun Gong protesters about to be arrested in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in the early phase of the persecution. Source: [Falun Dafa Information Center](#).

In China, state propaganda systematically [demonizes religious minorities](#) that are considered a threat to the ideology of the Communist Party. *Falun Gong* practitioners have been vilified as members of an “evil cult” since the 1999 ban, a label that justifies mass detention, torture, and organ harvesting. The *China Tribunal*, an independent panel, documented that *Falun Gong* adherents and other minorities such as Uyghurs are targeted victims of state-organized organ trafficking.

Since 2017, over a million Uyghurs in Xinjiang have been interned in so-called “re-education camps”, where they are subjected to forced labor, cultural eradication, and political indoctrination. State media portray this as “vocational training”, while reports of torture, forced sterilization, and the demolition of mosques are ignored. Tibetans suffer a similar fate: monasteries are destroyed, the Tibetan language is suppressed, and the Dalai Lama is defamed as a “separatist”. These narratives, spread by state-controlled media, legitimize cultural genocide.

Russia: State media as a tool of repression

In Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned as an “extremist organization” in 2017, a move that was prepared by years of state-orchestrated media campaigns. State media outlets such as Rossija 24 and RT portrayed the group as a threat to national security, despite no evidence of criminal behavior. After the ban, over 180,000



A public warning against the Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Torzhok in Tver Oblast, Russia in 2012. The headline says “Caution, sect!!!” The text goes on to say, “Brothers and sisters! As became known recently, near the walls of our holy monastery, followers of the sect Jehovah's Witnesses secretly preach their teachings. Be careful and vigilant! Don't let yourself be fooled! You can get answers to all questions about faith and the Church from the brotherhood of the monastery at any time and every Sunday within the framework of Boris-Glebsk conversations.” Photo: Artyom Svetlov / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

members were forced underground, hundreds were detained, and many reported torture and house searches. State media played a central role in rallying public support for the persecution and suppressing dissent. This case shows how media can be used as a tool of state repression.

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In India, nationalist outlets inflame religious tensions, targeting Christians and Muslims. The 2022 *U.S. State Department Report* warns that media bias plays a growing role in triggering violence.

Nigeria: The hidden tragedy of Christians

In Nigeria, the persecution of Christians remains one of the least reported human rights crises. Between 2020 and 2024, according to Open Doors, over 14,000 Christians were killed by extremist groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and radicalized Fulani militias. In 2023 alone, over 5,000 Christians were murdered, thousands of churches destroyed, and hundreds of thousands displaced. Yet global media coverage remains patchy, and the religious motive is often omitted. This silence promotes impunity and signals to persecutors that the world will look away. In regions with weak state protection, the media's failure to report the truth allows suffering to continue unabated.

Silence is complicity. When the media remain silent about the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, they are not only failing as journalists – they are complicit. Over 14,000 dead in four years, thousands of churches destroyed – and hardly any reporting. Democracy dies in darkness. When journalists conceal “crimes against humanity”, they violate their ethical duty to truthfulness. Silence does not protect the victims but encourages the perpetrators.

Japan: Media witch hunt with global consequences



Victims of state persecution: *Family Federation* believers protesting in the Japanese city of Chiba 18th May 2025. Photo: *FFWPU*

In Japan, media smear campaigns have reached unprecedented levels. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, the *Unification Church* was branded a “cult” in over 4,000 articles, even though there was no connection to the crime. The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, acted out of personal motives, but the media used the tragedy to unleash a witch hunt.

Under this pressure, the government took legal action, which led to the *dissolution* of the *church* by the *Tokyo District Court* on 25th March 2025. The *appeal* is pending, but the social damage is immense: children are being bullied, companies are *terminating contracts*, and banks are refusing to provide services. If the appeal fails, all *assets will be seized*, and churches will be closed – an unprecedented destruction of a legal religious community without any criminal basis.

This process is a wake-up call for democracies worldwide. Japan, the third-largest economy and a supposedly stable democracy, is trampling on fundamental principles such as religious freedom and the rule of law. Dictatorial and autocratic regimes are rubbing their hands with glee as they watch a democratic nation set such precedents. The “copycat effect” is inevitable: authoritarian states could use Japan’s actions as a blueprint to suppress religious minorities under the guise of media and political unpopularity.

International voices, including former US Ambassador *Sam Brownback*, former Speaker *Newt Gingrich*, and USCIRF Co-Chair *Katrina Lantos-Swett*, condemn this as a direct attack on democracy. European experts such as *Massimo Introvigne*, *Willy Fautré*, and *Aaron Rhodes* also warn that Japan is *opening a Pandora’s box* that could have global repercussions.



Warning that Japan’s dehumanizing treatment of *Family Federation* members could have global repercussions: Dr. Massimo Introvigne

Continued in *part 3*.

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Featured image above: Media as weapon:

Angry Chinese man accusing woman after
reading about cult in a newspaper.
Illustration: Grok xAI, 25th May 2025.

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