

Defending Religious Freedom in Japan: A Call for Dialogue Against Targeted Dissolutions

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The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), U.S. Chapter, expresses deep concern over the growing threats to religious freedom in Japan, particularly in relation to the Unification Church (UC) and Jehovah's Witnesses. Despite no evidence of criminal wrongdoing, the Japanese government moved to dissolve the UC last year, following intense media and public backlash after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The assassin, Tatsuya Yamagami, reportedly harbored a longstanding grudge against the UC due to his mother's significant donations to the organization over two decades ago. This situation raises important questions: Why did Yamagami's resentment persist for two decades, and why was Abe, who merely sent a congratulatory message to UC leadership, the target?

It seems that both the government and media have positioned the UC as a scapegoat. While the UC faced past criticisms regarding fundraising and recruitment methods, it implemented legal and ethical reforms over a decade ago. The UC's teachings have provided meaning and hope to over 50,000 followers in Japan, and UC-affiliated NGOs, including the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) <https://www.upf.org/> and the Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) <https://www.wfwp.org/> have contributed to international peace and development efforts, such as school-building projects in developing nations. Both UPF and WFWP hold consultative status with the United Nations, underscoring their recognized role in global humanitarian efforts.

However, since Abe's assassination, criticism has intensified, led by left-wing groups like the Japanese Communist Party and certain media outlets critical of the UC's anti-communist stance. Nationalist right-wing groups have also criticized the UC due to its Korean origins. This escalation of anti-UC sentiment appears to provide the Japanese government with an opportunity to shift focus from security failures in Abe's protection, while gaining political favor by targeting an unpopular minority group. This trend of hostility towards religious minorities is becoming a concerning issue within Japanese public opinion.

Furthermore, approximately 4,300 UC members were forcibly kidnapped and deprogrammed against their will between 1966 and 2013. One such case involved Mr. Tōru Gotō, a UC member, who was abducted and held in confinement for twelve and a half years, from 1995 to 2008, to force him to abandon his faith. After finally escaping, Mr. Gotō filed a lawsuit against his deprogrammers in 2011, asserting his basic human right to religious freedom. In 2014, Japan's

Supreme Court ruled in his favor, ordering the deprogrammers to pay him 22,000,000 yen (approximately \$146,666 at an exchange rate of 150 yen per dollar) in compensation. (Masumi Fukuda, *Hanada*, December 2022, pp. 88-101. Bitter Winter https://bitterwinter.org/the-seiron-magazine-report-on-the-unification-church-case-in-japan-5-the-tragic-reality-of-deprogramming-part-i/?_gl=1*xx47fo*_up*MQ..*_ga*MjEzNDEwODcxMi4xNzMxMjkyMjY4*_ga_BXXPYMB88D*MTczMTI5MjI2OC4xLjEuMTczMTI5MjI5Mi4wLjAuMA..)

Most major religious organizations have remained silent on these infringements of religious freedom, distancing themselves from minority groups. Only a few, such as the Sōtō Zen group founded by Dōgen and some independent Christian communities, have spoken against the government's dissolution of the UC. Historical precedent reminds us of the dangers of such silence: in the 1930s, the Japanese government targeted new religious groups like Ōmoto-kyō and Hitono-michi as threats to national stability. Established Buddhist and Christian institutions endorsed these persecutions, culminating in the 1939 Religious Organization Law, which mobilized all religious groups in support of the wartime effort.

Further compounding concerns, the Japanese Ministry of Health has now accused Jehovah's Witnesses' religious education of constituting child abuse, a charge that risks becoming a slippery slope of anti-minority religious persecution. Without conscientious voices advocating for religious tolerance, such patterns of intolerance could extend to other minority groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Unitarian Church.

As the U.S. Chapter of IARF, committed to safeguarding religious freedom, we assert that this is a fundamental human right, especially for minority and less popular groups. While we may not agree with every teaching or practice, we oppose government-imposed dissolution of organizations not guilty of criminal offenses. Although improvement may be possible, we believe interreligious dialogue offers a constructive approach to self-reflection and reform.

We urge the Japanese government to reconsider its decision to dissolve the UC. We also call on conscientious religious organizations to engage in dialogue with the UC and Jehovah's Witnesses, to foster fair, objective self-assessment rather than government-imposed dissolution.