

UPF Japan: Decline of Religious Freedom in East Asia by Patricia Duvall

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The 2nd World Religious Leaders' Conference will be held on a four-day schedule starting August 19, similar to the first session, at a hotel in Seoul, South Korea.

In the second day of expert announcement session, French international lawyer Patricia Duvall reported on the crisis of religious freedom in Japan and South Korea. Below is the contents of the lecture.



Ladies and gentlemen. Worldwide, human strides for resilience and divinity are facing direct opposition. Movements that misunderstand religion as a means of control over humans, and movements that support political regimes that aim to control humanity.

Particularly in East Asia, we are now witnessing the decline of religious freedom, with attacks on groups considered "conservative religion" in Japan and South Korea, not to mention China, a typical example of religious oppression.

In Japan, in 1987 a group of radical leftist political-minded lawyers formed a lawyer network with the clear aim of countering the Unification Church. Known as the "National Lawyers Liaison on Enthusiastic Commercial Law" was established with the clear objective of eliminating the church in post-World War II Asia, when the Unification Church was fighting against atheistic communism that was a threat to religion.

The phrase "sensitive trade law" in the name of Lawyers Network is a manufacturer of them, considering church offerings as for-profit activities, and making religious beliefs merely a means to deceive believers.

This network actively struggles with the Unification Church, and for that purpose, supports violent "deprogramming," that is, forcing church members to abandon faith as they are "brainwashed". In almost 40 years, approximately 4,300 members of the Unification Church in Japan fell victim to this violent "deliverance".



They were abducted by their families under the guidance of so called specialist "deprogrammers". These deprogrammers are some Protestant pastors who considered the Unification Church as a religious rivalry, and had made agreements with politically motivated lawyers to fight the church.

Lawyers Network has been using and encouraging these faith-breaking methods. Introduced parents to pastors, and that pastor, on a daily basis, persuasive and harsh criticism to believers who are locked up, accusing the teaching of the Unification Church is not faithful to the Bible.

The deprogramming lasted for months to years, and when the victim finally abandoned the faith and accepted to claim damages against the church to prove that he was truly leaving the Uniting Church, he was finally released from confinement.

Organized civil suits like this after receiving deprogramming have resulted in numerous judgments against a man who held a grudge against the Unification Church over his mother's contribution made about 20 years ago.

Using scapegoat rationalization and hate speech targeting the Unification Church spread rapidly in the media. Lawyers have accused the church of being the direct cause of Mr. Abe's murder, and for its origins in South Korea, it is essentially anti-social and anti-Japanese existence. The Lawyers Network took this incident as an opportunity. They pressured the government to file a claim for the dissolution of the church based on their misconduct judgments, and as a result, the Tokyo District Court approved the claim on March 25th of this year.

All these judgments against the church are based on violations of so called "social norms". But what exactly does social norms mean in the area of religious beliefs and practice? Given international human rights law and the obligations Japan has to the international community, it is not permissible to restrict the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief using this vague and arbitrary concept.

Otherwise, every religion or belief considered uncommon would be against "social norms." But in reality, Japanese courts have been manipulated by lawyers and the government followed them, and over the last decades have been repeating judgments to be called heresy inquisitions.

The Japanese Agency has now called for the dissolution of the Unification Church on the basis of this old, biased misconduct judgment. The reason was that it disturbed the peaceful life of many people, especially

adult children's opposition to their choices of faith, and severely harmed the "public welfare". However, in light of international human rights standards, the fact that some family members feel uncomfortable is not grounds for the dissolution of an entire religion.

For a religious corporation, dissolution is equivalent to a "death sentence". The UN Human Rights Committee has consistently advised Japan to stop restricting freedoms of religion or beliefs using the ambiguous notion of "public welfare". But Japan continues to ignore these demands.



The Tokyo High Court is currently being appealed and proceeded regarding the dissolution order, but the government is already preparing for the liquidation of religious corporations' assets, calling on former believers to claim damages as "victims," and trying to liquidate all the church's assets.

The term "social norms" is also included in the official guidelines for child protection published by the Japanese government in December 2022. It is stipulated that allowing a child to participate in religious activities is "psychological abuse," and verbal reprimand and fear mongering with references to "go to hell" is child abuse.

In response to the appeal of Jehovah's Witnesses, four UN Special Reporters sent open letters to the Japan-Trade Agency in April 2024, expressing their concerns over these guidelines and Japan's international responsibilities. Nonetheless, the government stepped in and launched a plan to "rescue" the children of the Uniting Church believers last January. This is a kind of "deprogramming" in schools. Children are forced to take "human rights classes", their parents' religions and beliefs are imposed on stigma, and churches are portrayed as if they are a criminal organization.

Children agitated by such anxious accusations will eventually be led to go to the church to consult with specially trained counselors by hostile former believers. This is a direct violation of parents' rights to educate their children according to their beliefs, and this right should be protected by several treaties signed by Japan.

Generally speaking, the problem of religious freedom in Japan can be summed up as follows. After the assassination of former prime minister Abe, lawyers have created a collective paranoia (a phenomenon of non-factual fear and doubt in society) by calling the Unification Church a criminal organization and treating followers as criminals. But in reality, none of the believers committed a crime.

Every oppressive measure they proposed to the government was easily accepted because it was called to combat "criminals" at the time. But in peacetime, it was completely unjustifiable. Whoever speaks in defense of the Unification Church is accused of encouraging criminals then and now.

The government's series of oppression policies that unfolded after the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe have been justified in the name of helping a number of "victims". But where the hell are those "victims"? The majority of the victims they depend on, or almost all of them are either created by deprogramming to believers or made up like children in schools.

The alleged "victims" are former believers who were forced to abandon their faith, or children who, despite not complaining, must be "rescued" from their parents' faith and values. Cultivated "critical thinking" of religion and mentored to provide "neutral" upbringing, it's like a communist country where children's education belongs to the state.

Furthermore, the Tokyo District Court also acknowledged that there is no victim, but has already been denied its credibility, creating a fantasy victims that people might recognize themselves as victims in the future. Thus making up the damage to "public welfare" and justifying the dissolution order.

Recently, in February of this year, the Japan Bar Association held a seminar in the Diet titled "Study Group for Effective Damage Relief and Prevention on Old Unification Church Problems" They have suggested that so-called anti-cult control measures be modeled on the French "anti-cult" system. The contents are as follows.

Enactment of new laws on mental manipulation. Establishment of anti-cult institutions to accumulate and disseminate hostile and unilateral reports, targeting movements suspected of cult behavior (in reality, those targeting non-traditional religious groups). The suggestions also included additional provisions aimed at protecting second generation believers. Legislation calls for criminal penalties on parents and followers of religious corporations, especially when they have "harmed the welfare of a child on the basis of religious activities or doctrine," i.e. if they have provided religious education.

Moreover, religious corporations would be subject to dissolution if there were such violations. If such measures were adopted by the Diet, it would threaten religious freedom in all sects in Japan even more.

France's anti-cult agency has repeatedly been convicted by courts of defamation, and its entire system has also been accused by the Council of Europe and the UN special reporter on "freedom of religion or belief". Currently, the situation in South Korea is similar to Japan in many ways and interlinked. "Heresy hunting" is going on the same way.

The anti-cult movement in South Korea is being led by fundamentalist Protestant pastors, and they are still doing deprogramming, but not being punished for anything.

In a highly suspicious case, the leading pastor of the "Anti-Heresy Committee," an anti-cult group established in the Presbyterian of Korea, attempted deprogramming against women believers in another Christian organization called New Heaven and Earth. But it ended in failure, and the woman divorced her husband who forced her to leave.

And her husband beat her to death with an iron rod. But the pastor did not reflect on it, he attacked the new heaven and earth and accused the death of this woman believer. Exactly the same structure that imposed responsibility on the Unification Church in the shooting of former PM Abe.

A 'cult' was called to blame in the death of a female believer, despite the apparent involvement of a deprogrammer. The pastor even revealed that she advised her ex-husband right before the murder. The pastor explained it without any offense at a forum held in Seoul in December 2022 after the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe.

Lawyers from Japan were invited by the "National Liaison Meeting for Lawyers Against the Spiritual Commercial Law" and Japanese Diet members were also present. Japanese lawyers have explained that they are now aiming to dissolve the Unification Church, with a member of the Diet saying, "South Korea and Japan must work closely together, as forces will definitely emerge to hide assets during the dissolution process."

This is the exact same time that the South Korean prosecutor started an investigation against the Unification Church. Hard to believe it's a coincidence. Japanese anti-unification church lawyers have been actively working with South Korea's anti-cult movement, and possibly the South Korean government, for the past few years. During the same meeting, there was a suggestion that South Korea should learn from countries like France to fight against "pseudo religion" and introduce new legislation.

Finally, to compare, the concept of "public welfare" also exists in the Korean Constitution, and is used by the legislature as a basis for restricting civil liberties and rights. But this is against the provisions of the Code of Freedom that South Korea has also ratified. In conclusion, the decline of freedom of religion or belief has become extremely dangerous in both countries.

The "re-education" of children in schools shows how maliciously twisted international human rights norms can be, and as a result, the rights that should be protected can be extinguished. To view religious education for children as a criminal crime and that children's religious freedom means separation from parental choice is a clear misinterpretation of the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" and is a deliberate disregard for the rights of parents to education.

Our freedom is quite fragile. We, therefore, may be determined to guard the right of freedom of religion or beliefs, as the most precious gift. Thank you for listening.