

# **JAPAN 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits religious organizations from exercising any political authority or receiving privileges from the state. According to the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA), there are approximately 180,000 registered religious organizations with corporate status that received government tax benefits.

Former prime minister Shinzo Abe's July 8 assassination drew strong media attention to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification – known as the Unification Church – including demands for government measures to address church practices. Abe's assassin, whose family was allegedly bankrupted by his mother's voluntary participation in the Unification Church, said he targeted Abe due to the former prime minister's ties with the church. In October, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced his government would launch an investigation into the church under the "right to inquiry" provision of the Religious Corporations Act, citing 1,700 complaints received through a government hotline. In November and December, the government sent the Unification Church inquiries as part of the investigation. The church denied any wrongdoing. In December, the Diet passed two laws prohibiting "unfair" solicitation of donations and extending the period donors may be reimbursed for such donations. In 2021, according to the latest statistics available, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) reported five cases of religious freedom abuses compared with four in 2020 and provided various forms of nonbinding assistance. According to the Japan Uyghur Association (JUA), individuals connected with the People's Republic of China (PRC) continued to intimidate JUA members residing in Japan by contacting them and making implied threats to their families residing in the PRC or by attempting to influence Uyghur Muslim organizations in Japan. The JUA stated that the government generally showed willingness to protect Uyghur Muslims in the country and did not deport any to the PRC during the year. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to express concern regarding the government's interpretation of the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its protocol, which resulted in a continued low rate of approval of refugee applications. According to available information, the ministry granted refugee status to 11 applicants based on a well-founded fear of persecution for religious

reasons in 2021, up from two in 2020. The government continued to grant special permits to stay on humanitarian grounds to most of the approximately 380 to 400 Rohingya Muslims who had entered the country on the basis of fear of ethnic and religious persecution in Burma and to those who were born in Japan.

The Unification Church stated its members suffered attacks, assaults, and death threats since the assassination of Abe. Media outlets reported that while reluctance to have Islamic cemeteries in their neighborhoods persisted for some local communities in the western part of the country, a cemetery was accepted by a community in Oita Prefecture.

In meetings with government agencies and lawmakers, U.S. embassy and Department of State officials encouraged the government to continue working with the United States to protect Muslims from the PRC and other countries otherwise restricting religious freedom. In conversations and meetings with the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations, as well as with leaders of religious groups and organizations representing religious minorities and with religious freedom advocates, embassy officials underscored the priority the United States places on respect for religious freedom, discussed issues faced by these communities, and advised some of them on outreach efforts with the government.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 124.2 million (midyear 2022). A report by the ACA indicates that membership in religious groups totaled 181 million as of December 31, 2020. This number, substantially greater than the country's population, reflects many citizens' affiliation with multiple religions. For example, it is common for followers of Buddhism to participate in religious ceremonies and events of other religions, such as Shinto, and vice versa. According to the ACA, the definition of follower and the method of counting followers vary with each religious organization. Religious affiliation includes 87.9 million Shinto followers (48.5 percent), 83.9 million Buddhists (46.3 percent), 1.9 million Christians (1 percent), and 7.3 million adherents of other religious groups (4 percent). The category of "other" and nonregistered religious groups includes Islam, the Baha'i Faith, Hinduism, and Judaism. Media reports indicate the

Unification Church has approximately 600,000 followers (approximately 0.5 percent of the population).

Most immigrants and foreign workers practice religions other than Buddhism or Shinto, according to an NGO in close contact with foreign workers. Waseda University Professor Emeritus Tanada Hirofumi, an expert regarding the Muslim community, estimates that as of 2020, there were approximately 230,000 Muslims in the country, including approximately 47,000 citizens. Most of the approximately 380 to 400 Rohingya Muslims in the country live in Gunma Prefecture, north of Tokyo, with some residing in Saitama, Chiba, Tokyo, and Nagoya, according to Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan (BRAJ) President Zaw Min Htut. Uyghur Cultural Center President Ilham Mahmut said most of the approximately 2,000 Uyghur Muslims in the country continue to reside in Tokyo or its surrounding prefectures of Chiba, Saitama, and Kanagawa. He estimates that approximately 760 of the around 2,000 Uyghur Muslims are naturalized Japanese citizens. The Jewish population is approximately 2,000 to 4,000, according to a representative of the American Jewish Committee.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, requires the state to refrain from religious education or any other religious activity, and prohibits compelling any person to take part in any religious practice. It does not allow religious organizations to exercise political authority or receive privileges from the state. According to the government's interpretation, the constitution allows an individual belonging to a political party backed by a religious organization to hold public office involving national political affairs, provided that the individual and the religious organization are legally two separate entities and that the individual does not act as a religious representative during his or her time in office. Religious organizations are also allowed to lobby and campaign for politicians and express political opinions publicly. The constitution states that the people shall not abuse their rights and shall be responsible to use these rights for the public welfare.

The government does not require religious groups to register or apply for certification, but the law exempts government-certified religious groups with corporate status from paying income tax on donations and religious offerings used as part of their operational and maintenance expenses akin to nonprofit organizations. The government requires religious groups applying for corporate status to prove they have a physical space for worship and that their primary purpose is disseminating religious teachings, conducting religious ceremonies, and educating and nurturing believers. An applicant must present, in writing, a three-year record of activities as a religious organization, a list of members and religious teachers, the rules of the organization, information about the method of making decisions on managing assets, statements of income and expenses for the past three years, and a list of assets. The law stipulates prefectural governors have jurisdiction over groups seeking corporate status in their respective prefecture, and that groups must apply for registration with prefectural governments. Exceptions are granted for groups with offices in multiple prefectures, which they may register with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). After the MEXT Minister or a prefectural governor confirms an applicant meets the legal definition of a certified religious group with corporate status, the law requires the applicant to formulate administrative rules pertaining to its purpose, core personnel, and financial affairs. Applicants become religious corporations only after the MEXT Minister or governor approves their application and the applicants subsequently register.

The law requires certified religious corporations to disclose their assets, income, and expenditures to the government. The law also authorizes the government to investigate possible violations of regulations governing for-profit activities. Authorities have the right to suspend a religious corporation's for-profit activities for up to one year if the group violates the regulations.

Under the "right of inquiry" provision of the Religious Corporation Act, the government may investigate religious corporations suspected of committing acts that are illegal or are deemed to clearly harm the public welfare. A court may order the dissolution of a religious corporation if the court finds they have committed such acts. After dissolution, the law does not hinder a religious group from continuing to practice its religion as a noncorporate entity.

The law stipulates that worship and religious rituals performed by inmates in penal institutions, alone or in a group, shall not be prohibited. To support the law and the constitutional right to religious freedom, the MOJ offers inmates access to volunteer chaplains from various faiths in prisons.

The law states that schools established by the national and local governments must refrain from religious education or other activities in support of a specific religion. Private schools are permitted to teach specific religions. The law also states that an attitude of religious tolerance and general knowledge regarding religion and its position in social life should be valued in education. Both public and private schools must develop curricula in line with MEXT standards. These standards are based on the law, which states that schools should give careful consideration when teaching religion in general to junior high and high school students.

Labor law states a person may not be disqualified from union membership on the basis of religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On July 8, former prime minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated by a man who news reports stated claimed to be motivated by animus toward the Unification Church. The assassination drew attention to the church in Japan, which according to a Tokyo Broadcasting System Television news program in August that cited an internal document obtained from a former member of the church, raised approximately ¥60 billion (\$455 million) from its followers annually from 1999 to 2011. Media outlets reported that the Unification Church demanded its followers donate large sums of money and purchase items. Abe's assassin, whose family was allegedly bankrupted by his mother's voluntary participation in the Unification Church, stated he targeted Abe due to the former prime minister's ties with the church, including his speaking at an event hosted by the Universal Peace Federation, an NGO established by the church's founders. According to a media survey, more than 100 out of 712 members of the Diet had some connections with the Unification Church. These included speaking at church events and church members volunteering to help with Liberal Democratic Party member

election campaigns. On October 24, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio dismissed Economic Revitalization Minister Yamagiwa Daishiro after he initially failed to disclose his attendance at Unification Church events.

In October, Kishida, for the first time in the country's history, exercised the "right of inquiry" provision under the Religious Corporation Act to open an investigation into the operations and management of the Unification Church due to reports that it solicited coerced or excessive donations. The church is a registered religious organization with corporate status under the act. An official statement from the church in response to the inquiry offered condolences to Abe's family and stated the church would "fully cooperate with any inquiries from authorities and make relevant information available to the press as appropriate." In November and December, MEXT sent the Unification Church inquiries regarding civil court judgments on donation collection, its accounting practices, and its organizational management. The church responded to these inquiries. Kishida said a government hotline set up for inquiries related to the Unification Church received more than 1,700 complaints alleging financial and mental health damage. The church denied any wrongdoing. In September and October, Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, (CAP-Freedom of Conscience), a Paris-based NGO, submitted a series of statements to the UN Human Rights Committee that said that the Unification Church had become a victim of "a campaign of intolerance, discrimination, and persecution" in Japan since Abe's assassination. The church stated its members suffered attacks, assaults, and death threats as a result of negative media attention.

The Diet passed on December 10 new and revised legislation that the government said was intended to prevent organizations (religious or otherwise) from engaging in "unfair" solicitation of donations and from requesting donors to use real estate or other assets as collateral to procure funds for donations, and to provide relief for individuals and their families financially damaged by such organizations by allowing them to recoup donations and cancel contracts. The legislation prohibits organizations from soliciting donations by "unfair" means, including restricting freedom of movement or obstructing consultation with family or outside groups. The legislation calls for imprisonment of up to one year, a fine of up to ¥10 million (\$75,900), or both, for repeat violations. The legislation also extends the time period that individuals and their families may be reimbursed for donations or

cancel contracts deemed unfair from five years to 10 years. The Unification Church said these laws should be immediately rescinded because they violated religious freedom and contract law.

Certain lawmakers, religious leaders, religious scholars, and lawyers said that the controversy surrounding the Unification Church was not about religious freedom, citing what they said were various forms of harm the church had imposed on its own adherents and on society, such as psychological and financial distress, including household bankruptcy due to excessive donations. For example, the Japan Federation of Bar Associations stated it received 309 complaints against the Unification Church on its pro bono hotline in September and October. The federation reported 80 percent of complaints were regarding financial distress, with amounts lost up to more than ¥100 million (\$759,000). Individuals reported large debts and loss of homes and land taken as collateral because of donations to the church. One individual reported being forced by the church to work for election campaigns and being subject to labor exploitation.

Children of certain Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses members stated at November Diet hearings that the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses violated religious freedom by using force to compel minors (younger children and teenagers) of their members to participate in Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses practices. Former members of these organizations said that the government, including police and welfare offices, demonstrated a long-term reluctance to help Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses because it sought to avoid being involved in religious issues. Representatives of the church stated its believers acted and donated voluntarily and that criticism of the church from former members was causing psychological damage to practicing members. Jehovah's Witnesses officials stated that church members do not force children to adopt their faith and that certain disgruntled former associates were making inaccurate and distorted claims.

In light of the controversy concerning the Unification Church, Prime Minister Kishida said in August that the separation of politics and religion contained in the country's constitution "is not meant to foreclose political activities by religious institutions." Natsuo Yamaguchi, president of Komeito, the junior coalition partner in the government, said in August that "political activities by religious groups are guaranteed by the constitution." Komeito was founded by the Soka

Gakkai religious group. In 1970, Komeito formally separated from Soka Gakkai due to what were described as publicly perceived constitutional concerns over the separation of religion and state. Komeito officially describes Soka Gakkai as a “major electoral constituency” that “does not influence party policy or activities.” Komeito voted in support of the legislation restricting unfair donations.

In December, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare published new guidelines for local governments outlining how religious doctrine could constitute child abuse, based on its interpretation of the Child Abuse Prevention Act. The guidelines state that corporal punishment for enforcing religious doctrine could constitute physical abuse. They also state that psychological abuse towards children could include verbal threats such as telling the child that they will go to hell; forcing participation in religious activities, including proselytization; impeding the free choice of education or career; restricting freedom of marriage or friendship; and forbidding access to age-appropriate entertainment for religious reasons. According to the guidelines, statutory child abuse includes banning a child’s access to medical treatment and showing children age-inappropriate sexual material.

Uyghur Muslims continued to report that the PRC maintained its practice of deploying officials in the PRC to intimidate Uyghur Muslims residing in Japan by implying risks to the safety of their families in the PRC. Uyghur Cultural Center President Ilham Mahmut said the PRC’s intimidation reduced communication between Uyghur Muslim residents in Japan and their families in Xinjiang out of fear of surveillance and safety risks. He stated the government continued to generally show willingness to protect Uyghur Muslims in the country, noting that the government did not deport any Uyghur Muslims to the PRC during the year and allowed Uyghur protests to occur, despite PRC objections.

According to the president of the Japanese Falun Dafa Association, the PRC Embassy in Tokyo continued to display material on its website that disparaged the Falun Gong. The president said Japanese authorities continued to grant permits for the association’s street marches that opposed the PRC’s repression against the Falun Gong in April and July in Tokyo and in May and October in Yokohama.

In September and October, several legal and religious groups protested Prime Minister Kishida’s decision for national government ministries to express



condolences on the death of former prime minister Shinzo Abe on September 27, the day of Abe's state funeral. The groups stated the flying of national flags and the observation of moments of silence were methods of mourning based on Japanese religious doctrines. They labeled Kishida's requirement to do so at the ministries as coercive mourning and therefore an infringement on constitutional religious freedom. The Prime Minister said the government's decision to offer official condolences would not compel private citizens to express condolences during the state funeral.

The MOJ's Human Rights Bureau continued to operate its hotline for human rights inquiries, available during the year in 10 different foreign languages – English, Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Nepali, Spanish, Indonesian, and Thai. In May, the MOJ reported that in 2021 (latest statistics available), its human rights division confirmed five cases were highly likely to have been religious freedom violations, compared with four such cases in 2020. The MOJ assisted the potential victims in all five cases by mediating between the parties, calling on alleged human rights violators to rectify their behavior, or referring the complainants to competent authorities for legal advice. These MOJ measures, however, were not legally binding.

According to the ACA, as of the end of 2020, the most recent year for which statistics are available, central and prefectural governments had certified 180,544 groups as religious groups with corporate status, compared with 180,828 such groups at the end of 2019. The large number reflected local units of religious groups registering separately. The government generally certified corporate status for religious groups when they met the requirements.

NGOs continued to express concern regarding the government's interpretation of the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its protocol, which resulted in a low rate of approval of refugee applications. The government recognized 74 refugees in 2021, the most recent year for which statistics are available, a record high and up from the 47 recognized refugees in 2020. Of the 74 recognized refugees, 32 were from Burma. The Justice Minister said in April that the government expedited screening of Burmese applications and took into consideration the instability in Burma after the military coup d'état in 2021. The government publicized the reasons for granting refugee status to some of the 74 individuals, stating it granted refugee status to 11 persons because of a

wellfounded fear of persecution for religious reasons. In 2021, 2,413 individuals applied for refugee status, down 39 percent from 3,936 applicants in 2020.

The government maintained its practice of granting special permits to stay in the country on humanitarian grounds under refugee status or other forms of permission to most of the nearly 400 Rohingya Muslims who had entered the country on the basis of ethnic and religious persecution in Burma or who were born in Japan. The majority of those individuals had resided in the country for more than 10 years, some more than 20 years. They were allowed to work and required regular renewal of their status by regional immigration offices. The government granted refugee status to eight Rohingya Muslims during the year, for a total of 26 with refugee status, according to BRAJ President Zaw Min Htut. The BRAJ president said approximately 10 Rohingya Muslims with pending applications for refugee status who were not associated with any formal resettlement program were prohibited from obtaining employment and faced hardships, including a lack of health care. The government deemed Rohingya Muslims in Japan stateless, including those born in Japan, irrespective of their residential status. Children of Rohingya Muslims with legal status receive the same public education and other social services as other residents.

According to the Uyghur Cultural Center president, the government over the last few years granted citizenship through naturalization to approximately 760 Uyghur Muslims, in addition to issuing permits for the remaining approximately 1,240 Uyghur Muslims in the country, most of whom came to the country from the PRC initially to study or work.

A Muslim man detained in the Nagoya immigration center began requesting halal meals in the summer. A civil society source reported the man lost approximately 10 kilograms (22 pounds) due to the immigration center's failure to fulfill his request. Press reported in August that the immigration center was still considering whether to provide halal accommodations and said the center's food was compatible with Muslim food preferences.

Civil society groups reported that it takes an average of three years for an applicant to be recognized as a refugee, and some cases involving multiple appeals have lasted 10 years.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Following the assassination of former prime minister Abe, Unification Church officials documented hundreds of cases of harassment across the country. Immediately after the assassination, the Unification Church headquarters and multiple local churches reported numerous death threats and demands for the organization to leave Japan. According to the church, harassment over the telephone and vandalism continued in the following months. The church reported multiple cases of family members pressuring them to leave the church, including through psychological means and physical assault. They also reported instances where Unification Church members were not allowed to use public facilities or participate in community volunteer activities.

Muslim communities said they characterized Japanese society as generally tolerant of their faith. Media outlets continued to maintain that local communities, particularly in the western part of the country, were reluctant to have Islamic cemeteries in their neighborhoods, citing local residents' concerns that the Islamic tradition of burying a body could contaminate soil and water (99 percent of the dead are cremated in Japan). Most of the seven cemeteries accepting Islamic burials are in the eastern part of the country. TOS TV Oita reported that the local community in Hiji town and the Beppu Muslim Association reached an agreement to allow the group to establish an Islamic graveyard, with the signing of the official agreement scheduled for the end of February 2023.

A representative of the American Jewish Committee said the country was very accepting of Judaism.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In meetings and interagency events with government ministries and with lawmakers, embassy and other U.S. government officials encouraged the government to continue to work with the United States to resist malign PRC activities that harm the religious freedom of Muslims and other groups originating from the PRC and from other countries.

The embassy closely monitored issues surrounding the Unification Church and maintained contact with Diet members, government regulators, those affected by church practices, and church representatives, emphasizing in all cases the importance of religious freedom.

In conversations and meetings with the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations as well as with leaders of religious groups and organizations representing religious minorities and with religious freedom advocates, including Rohingya and Uyghur Muslims and the Jewish and Falun Gong communities, embassy officials underscored the priority the United States places on respect for religious freedom, discussed issues faced by these communities, and advised some of them on their outreach efforts with the national government and local municipalities.