

# Bad Karma? Abe's Assassination and the Moonies

Jeff Kingston

**Abstract:** *The assassination of Abe Shinzo in July 2022 not only felled a political giant, but also propelled the government to seek dissolution of the Unification Church (UC), known as the Moonies in the Anglophone world, because the gunman told police that he targeted Japan's longest serving prime minister (2012-2020) due to his links with the UC. Ironically, the South Korea-based UC enjoyed extensive influence in the Abe faction of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a strange brew of clashing nationalisms given that Abe was an advocate of historical revisionism, a rightwing political movement that promotes an exonerating and glorifying narrative of Japan's shared past with Asia, while the UC was guilt-tripping donors about Japan's colonial rule in the Korean peninsula (1910-45).*

**Keywords:** *Abe; Unification Church; LDP; Moonies; Japan; Korea; assassination*

The assassination of Abe Shinzo in July 2022 not only felled a political giant, but also, by October 2023, propelled the government to seek dissolution of the Unification Church (UC), known as the Moonies in the Anglophone world, because the gunman told police that he targeted Japan's longest serving prime minister (2012-2020) due to his links with the church.

This article traces the unlikely arc of dynastic links between one of Japan's most powerful political families with a South Korean fundamentalist Christian group established by the self-proclaimed messiah Sun Myung Moon. The UC is infamous in Japan for controversial fundraising and recruiting methods in addition to conducting mass weddings. However, it was only in the summer of 2022 that the media drew back the veil on the UC's extensive political connections with Japan's long dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), igniting a firestorm of public condemnation.

Yamagami Tetsuya, the gunman, told police, "I believed Abe was tied to the Unification Church. Nobusuke Kishi [Japan's Prime Minister from 1957 to 1960 and Abe's grandfather] had brought the Unification Church to Japan. That's why I killed him" (Tokumoto 2023). His mother donated the family fortune to the UC, leaving the household destitute. As a result, Yamagami became increasingly resentful about a descent from a comfortable life to a precarious existence. Armed with a homemade blunderbuss, he took revenge, managing to come up from behind Abe and shoot him at close range while he was campaigning for an LDP candidate. In a society where guns are tightly controlled and violent crime is uncommon, the nation was left shocked by Abe's murder.

PM Kishida Fumio quickly announced there would be a state funeral to honor Abe, only the second for a post-WWII prime minister. Initially, there was strong public support for this initiative, but the mood quickly shifted as

the media spotlighted the UC's cozy ties with the LDP and its extensive record of coerced donations and dubious practice of 'spiritual sales,' charging exorbitant amounts for various 'sacred' objects ostensibly as atonement for ancestral sins. Suddenly a nation grieving Abe's death discovered a hidden world where a notorious religious group held enormous influence in the corridors of power. The subsequent anti-Abe backlash was quick and widespread, fed by the UC revelations and extensive reporting about a series of cronyism scandals implicating Abe that slashed his approval rating to 34 per cent (NHK 2020) on the eve of his 2020 resignation (Nakano NYT 2020).

Clarifying his motive, Yamagami also told investigators about Abe's upbeat video message of support in 2022 to the Think Tank Rally of Hope, an event hosted by the Universal Peace Federation, a UC affiliate founded by Moon in 2005; Abe was introduced there as an heir to the Kishi political dynasty (Asahi 2022a). Abe previously had sent congratulatory messages to this group in 2006 when he served as Chief Cabinet Secretary. This drew criticism, because by this time there was widespread public condemnation of the UC's deceptive marketing schemes and many complaints about coerced donations. In response to the uproar, Abe's office asserted that the telegram had been sent by mistake and that the person responsible was reprimanded.

Ironically, the South Korea-based UC enjoyed extensive influence in the Abe faction of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a strange brew of clashing nationalisms given that Abe was advocating for historical revisionism, a rightwing political movement that promotes an exonerating and glorifying narrative of Japan's shared past with Asia (Saaler 2022; Postel-Vinay 2023), while the UC was raising donations from Japanese by guilt-tripping them about Japan's colonial rule in the Korean peninsula (1910–45). Abe's

unapologetic revisionism of denying, minimizing, and whitewashing this history triggered vilification in South Korea and bilateral relations sank to new lows on his watch. Anti-zainichi (Japan-born ethnic Koreans) sentiments escalated in Japan, stoked by a tabloid media taking its cues from the prime minister's office (Schreiber 2016). In addition, when a jingoist organization called Zaitokukai marched through zainichi enclaves in Tokyo, spewing hate and brandishing discriminatory signs, Abe never repudiated such actions. His government was dilatory about curbing the hatemongering, demonstrating a high level of tolerance for intolerance (Guardian 2014). At that time, Abe encouraged LDP lawmakers to accept support from the UC, which had gained a higher profile among politicians in part due to its prominent lobbying since the 1980s in favor of a state secrets protection law aimed at clamping down on spying (Asahi 2022a). To that end, in 2013 Abe secured Diet approval of a Special State Secrets Law that also targeted whistleblowing and investigative reporting (Repeta 2014).

Given that the UC is a Korean group raising donations from Japanese by badgering them about Japanese colonial era misdeeds, how did it penetrate Japan's conservative nationalist establishment as early as the 1960s? Such critical views of Japanese colonialism were awkward for Kishi, who had been directly involved with Tokyo's exploitation of Asia 1931–45 (Samuels 2003), but he and Moon were committed anti-communists. During the Cold War, ideological common ground trumped nationalist grievances and anti-Korean prejudice, facilitating UC penetration of Japan's elite political circles. These connections persisted into the 21st century, well after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Despite the end of the Cold War in Europe, its legacies remain prominent in contemporary Asia, where the Korean peninsula remains divided and the China/Taiwan standoff

smolders. Moreover, the Japanese government is beset by strategic anxieties linked to communist states, namely the spectacular rise of China over the past few decades and North Korea's nuclear missile program. Thus, there are still significant ideological bonds between the UC and the LDP. Equally important, the LDP until recently depended heavily on UC support staff in handing out leaflets, writing postcards for candidates, and manning the sound trucks that canvass neighborhoods during campaigns. The UC and LDP also share a common "family values" agenda, opposing women's and gay rights. So, there are several factors that contribute to this strange bedfellow's collaboration.

### **Kishi Connection**

Since Japan's defeat in 1945 and the end of its colonial rule on the Korean peninsula, relations between Tokyo and Seoul have ranged from frosty to hostile due to unresolved historical grievances, territorial disputes, and the irreconcilable views of victims and perpetrators about the long shadow of their shared past. Relations were not normalized until 1965 and only then because Washington pressured both governments to do so. However, despite the \$300 million in grants and \$500 million in loans from Japan that jumpstarted South Korea's economic miracle, there was no apology from Tokyo and no breakthrough on reconciliation (Ju 2020). Nonetheless, Kishi rolled out the red carpet for the UC.

The Cold War is a useful prism for understanding the dynamics of American-Japanese-Korean relations after 1947 and the rise of the UC in Japan. In 1947, the US adopted a "reverse course" in Japan in line with shifting Cold War priorities that involved embracing the conservative elite that had led Japan into the Pacific War (Dower 1999). The US wanted to showcase Japan as an American success story and build it up as a bulwark of

containment towards the Soviet Union. Inter alia this involved installing and nurturing reliable conservative support for the American military presence, because leftwing parties were opposed to the US alliance and base presence, arguing that this contravened Article 9 of the US-drafted 'peace' constitution. The reverse course also meant the end of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. This was a deeply flawed proceeding of "victor's justice" that issued guilty verdicts against all the prosecuted Class A war criminals; this designation was reserved for those deemed responsible for crimes against peace and leading Japan into war. Following the execution of seven of the convicted defendants on December 23, 1948, other Class A war crimes suspects were released from Sugamo prison, where they had been held in pre-trial detention. One of those fortunate detainees was Kishi Nobusuke, who a decade later would become prime minister of Japan as head of the LDP, a party established in 1955 with financial help from the CIA. He was the Minister of Commerce in the Tojo cabinet, signed the declaration of war against the US, and was also implicated in forced labor mobilization in Japanese occupied Manchukuo. Thus, there were ample reasons why Kishi was accused of Class A war crimes. Yet, the US decided to release Kishi, Kodama Yoshio and Sasakawa Ryoichi, an unsavory trio of alleged Class A war criminals that US intelligence dubbed the "Manchuria Gang" (Tokumoto 2023). All were staunch anti-communists and became influential in post-WWII Japan: Kishi as prime minister and Kodama as a rightwing fixer with underworld connections. Sasakawa, for his part, sponsored various right-wing organizations and causes with the wealth he gained from a government-awarded monopoly over boat racing that generated lucrative revenues from associated gambling operations. He reinvented himself as a peace-loving philanthropist while establishing the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. Significantly, Kishi, Kodama and

Sasakawa backed the Kokusai Shokyo Rengo (International Federation for Victory Over Communism), a political arm of the UC established in 1968 by Reverend Moon; Sasakawa served as the federation's honorary chairman (Suzuki 2017; Tokumoto 2023). The Kokusai Shokyo Rengo established a network of local organizations across Japan and played a crucial role in the LDP's success in national elections (Asahi 2023d).

The UC was founded in Seoul by Moon in 1954 in the wake of the Korean War. By 1958, the UC was proselytizing in Japan and gained status there as a religious organization in 1964. The UC established its headquarters in an affluent neighborhood in Shibuya, Tokyo, located next door to Kishi's house, the same building used as the Prime Minister's Official Residence while Kishi was in power 1957–1960. Kishi was the maternal grandfather of Abe Shinzo, who openly revered him and acknowledged his enormous influence on his views and agenda (Abe 2007). Kishi and Moon developed a close association following an introduction by US Ambassador Douglas MacArthur III, who worked with Kishi on revising the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty. Subsequently in the 1970s MacArthur worked for the UC-affiliated *Washington Times* newspaper (Fraser Report 1978).

Kishi casts a long shadow over the LDP. Media reports following Abe's assassination detailed the extensive influence of the UC in the Seiwa Kai, a hardline rightwing faction in the LDP. This faction was headed by Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro during the late 1980s and by his son Abe Shinzo at the time of his shooting. In the 1970s, Kishi frequently attended events hosted by the church and its affiliated organizations. In 1974, he hosted a dinner in Tokyo attended by Moon and Finance Minister Fukuda Takeo, who subsequently became prime minister in 1976. Fukuda established the Seiwa Kai, as of 2023 the largest faction in the LDP. At this UC-sponsored event, Fukuda gave

a speech, remarking, "A great leader has emerged in Asia. His name is Sun Myung Moon. Today, I'm in the same place as Mr. Moon, an occasion that I was eagerly looking forward to, and listened to his lofty preaching. It is really a great day today" (Tokumoto 2023). Such high-level political connections greatly facilitated the UC's expansion in Japan and helped it weather a cascade of negative revelations from the 1970s until it finally became too toxic in 2022.

Moon portrayed himself as a kingmaker in Japanese politics and was not shy about publicly proclaiming how effective the UC was in helping LDP members win elections (Asahi 2023d). He attributed this success to the UC's heavy spending in the election campaigns and praised UC campaign workers as "well-trained special forces." The UC was able to tap into political ambitions to make significant inroads in the LDP during the 1980s and in the 1990s, benefitting from the party's vulnerability over major influence peddling scandals that rendered UC support even more crucial (Asahi 2022a; Asahi 2023d). Being useful to LDP politicians was an insurance policy against the rising uproar over spiritual sales. UC members would go door-to-door selling various items alleged to have spiritual power, assuring customers that they would bring them good fortune and atone for the "bad karma" accrued from ancestral misdeeds. People were pressured into buying marble vases, ivory name seals, prayer beads, ginseng, small replicas of temples and so forth, items that were cheaply imported and sold for astronomical prices, a spiritual markup that sparked numerous complaints about hardnosed sales tactics. The complaints that followed led to the creation of a national lawyers' group in 1987 that took legal action against the organized fleecing (StopReikan).

### Religion as Guise?

According to a US Congressional investigation, “Moon used the guise of religion to further his economic and political goals through the Moon Organization, a global network of UC-affiliated religious and secular groups, businesses, and nonprofit corporations” (Nippon.com 2023). Between 1976 and 1977, the House Subcommittee chaired by Representative Donald Fraser (Minnesota) investigated how the South Korea government was gaining political influence by bribing US Congressmen and cultivating a power network linked to the UC (Fraser Report 1978, 338-355). The Fraser Report revealed that the KCIA was using the UC as a front for its clandestine operations in the US (Fraser Report 1978, 311-39; Bale 2017, 66). The KCIA was eager to cultivate Nixon by proxy because they wanted him to overturn a troop drawdown in Vietnam he had announced as a goodwill gesture towards China at a time when the White House was eager to promote normalization of ties with Beijing (Fraser Report 1978). The KCIA shared the anticommunist ideology of the UC and developed strong personal connections during the Park Chung Hee era (1961-79).

During the Watergate scandal, Moon and the UC offered public declarations of support for President Richard Nixon, taking out full page ads in US newspapers and conducting candlelight vigils calling on the public to rally around the disgraced president. Subsequently, President Ronald Reagan, another Republican, became a loyal reader/supporter of the UC-owned *Washington Times*. Curiously, in 1984, former prime minister Kishi wrote to Reagan requesting a pardon for Moon, who was in a federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut serving time for tax evasion, but to no avail.

According to Jeffrey Bale, the covert KCIA-UC connection was extensive and had a geopolitical agenda (Bale 2017, 66). He argues that Moon sought to spread an authoritarian political model using religion as a cover and believed the separation of religion and state

favored Satan. Bale links the UC with the World Anti-Communist League, “an international umbrella organization encompassing numerous extreme right and neo-fascist groups” (Bale 2017, 67). Citing the Fraser Report, Bale concludes that, “[Moon is] the key figure in an international network of [front] organizations engaged in economic and political as well as religious activities. [It] is essentially one worldwide organization, under the centralized direction and control of Moon. In the training and use of lower-ranking members, it resembles a paramilitary organization, while in other respects it has the characteristics of a tightly disciplined international political party” (Bale 2017, 100).

There is considerable controversy over whether the UC is more a business enterprise than a religion, and to the extent it is acknowledged to be a religion, it is often dismissed as a cult. Chiba University’s Ioannis Gaitanidis (2022) warns that deploying the pejorative term ‘cult’ can be used to justify infringement on the religious freedom of groups so designated. The emphasis on fundraising by the UC is seen as disreputable, a commodification of the sacred, but Gaitanidis notes that in our modern consumerist society, “religious dynamics, self-transformation and monetary transactions are impossible to disentangle from one another” (Gaitanidis 2022, 156). He also points out that, “the distinction between religious orthodoxy and religious heresy has frequently been read as a distinction between ‘bad’ religion and ‘good’ religion” (Gaitanidis 2022, 161).

Yet the UC stands accused of defrauding people and pressuring them to make large donations, actions not covered by freedom of religion. As Sakurai argues, “You’re free to believe whatever you want. But you can’t infringe on others’ freedom in the process. It’s not permissible to conceal your true identity when recruiting followers or to deprive people of their power of independent judgment by fueling unfounded fears” (2022). The

“unfounded fears” refers to UC members warning people that their ancestors are burning in Hell and that saving them requires atonement through the purchase of spiritual goods and large donations.

British sociologist Eileen Barker, author of *The Making of a Moonie* (1984), drew on a decade of intensive research on the UC in the UK, where church officials gave her abundant access. She makes a strong case that it is indeed a religion and members live accordingly, and dismisses claims about brainwashing of recruits, citing the small number of people who join after workshops and the high percentage of dropouts. It seems that if mind-control is practiced, it is remarkably ineffective. She found that members tended to be youthful seekers, looking for some meaning in life and a cause to devote themselves to. Sakurai, Japan’s leading authority on the UC in Japan, asserts Barker has it backwards, arguing that “before they became seekers, they were targeted and chosen by the UC” for intensive indoctrination (Sakurai 2010, 332). They are isolated from society due to the church demanding that they cut ties with family and friends.

Barker maintains that UK-based Moonies feel a strong sense of religious identity and lead their lives according to UC principles and doctrine, while Sakurai focuses on the UC’s duplicitous practices, systematic fraud, and how it funnels large sums to central HQ in Seoul that bankroll the conglomerate’s global business operations (Sakurai 2010; Sakurai 2019). He praises Barker’s rigorous study as a model of sociological inquiry, but implies that she may have been coopted by the UC, or at least have a conflict of interest due to accepting their funds for travel expenses. Indeed, the UC actively cultivates friendly ties with academics and journalists through its affiliated Professors World Peace Academy, established back in 1973 (Sakurai 2010, 323). Sakurai also dismisses the relevance of Barker’s findings for

Japan, since the UK group is peripheral to the church’s main activities, and argues that generalizing from her case study is misleading. He contends that the church is particularly exploitative in Japan. The fundraising focus of UC activities in Japan, what he dubs the “money tree,” is thus a defining difference with the UK branch (Sakurai 2000, 195). He asserts, “it is not appropriate to assume any similarity among the countries regarding the reaction of the host government or society towards the followers’ conversion process or the Church’s project development” (Sakurai 2019, 80). He also takes issue with her dismissal of criticism of the UC as representing intolerance towards new religions, arguing that it has inflicted significant financial harm, devastated families, engaged in illegal activities, and been found liable in court cases brought by those the UC defrauded (Sakurai 2010, 319–321). Furthermore, he asserts that UC dogma is antagonistic to Japan, declaring it should be subservient to Korea, ‘the Divine country.’ Atoning for ancestral sins and Japan’s colonial rule in Korea relegates Japan to a subordinate role that is exploited to maximize donations, a mission infused with unresolved nationalist grievances (Sakurai 2019, 79). While not quite dismissing the religious nature of the UC, Sakurai explains that “the church section, which is supposed to be the central focus of any Christian church, has shrunk, and the UC of Japan has wound up becoming an unbalanced religious organization in which the fund-raising sector has become bloated” (Sakurai 2019, 76). Sakurai also justifies criticism of the UC as a cult “to restore the order of civil society” (Sakurai 2000, 198). Religious freedom, he argues, does not mean one can do anything in the name of religion or deny others their constitutional rights.

The cash cow role of the UC in Japan generates skepticism about the group’s religiosity because sales quotas and funding goals seem to overshadow spiritualism and require a single-minded devotion. Insiders revealed that the UC

in Japan was expected to transfer \$2.5 million a month to help finance the money-losing *Washington Times* and that between 1975–1984 it had transferred at least \$800 million to the US to finance UC-related ventures there (McGill 2022). Regarding this massive infusion of capital from Japan, one researcher concludes that the “combination of encumbered capital, continuing unprofitability and costly errors” put the UC’s US-based operations in “a more precarious financial position than its impressive list of corporate entities might imply” (Bromley (1985, 263).

The annual fundraising target for the UC in Japan in the two decades before 2017 was estimated at about 30 billion yen, a heavy burden that translated into high sales quotas for members selling ‘spiritual goods’ at exorbitant prices. From 1980–87 there were 15,000 complaints by the general public accusing UC members of defrauding them through such spiritual sales, leading to the establishment of the lawyers’ network advocating for a clamp down on this practice and compensation for those who had been swindled. As a result of this backlash, the UC shifted to extracting more donations from its own members, resorting to coercive and deceptive methods to hit fundraising targets that frequently impoverished donors (Sakurai 2010). Apparently, UC members also identified vulnerable targets by scanning obituaries and visiting the bereaved, offering them emotional support and spiritual solace while promising to free them of bad karma (Fisher 2022).

The toolbox of deceit also included the UC’s clandestine backing for the establishment in 1987 of a Buddhist sect called Tenchi Seikyo in order to conceal the church’s Korean and Christian origins (Pearce 1994; Sakurai 2000). The founder was a charismatic Japanese woman who previously founded other Buddhist folk sects. Prior to establishing Tenchi-Seikyo, however, she secretly converted to the UC. With her as the face of the new sect, the UC

bankrolled a network of Tenchi Seikyo centers across the nation and recruited over 100,000 members to this syncretic fusion of fundamentalist Christianity and folk Buddhism. They, too, were bilked to help fund the UC conglomerate’s global empire under false pretenses.

Since 2009, after losing a case in the Tokyo District Court involving ‘spiritual sales’ by intimidation and deception, the UC issued a compliance order to its members calling on them to refrain from such unscrupulous fundraising methods (Mainichi 2009). The UC contends these practices are no longer an issue, but the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales asserts that the UC still relies on deceptive tactics, noting that in 2021 alone it received fraud complaints involving 300 million yen. Overall, the lawyers’ group has registered 35,000 claims since 1987 involving close to 123.7 billion yen (about \$880 million) (StopReikan). Nonetheless, while “the UC’s dubious activities piled up, the church has been allowed to carry on as it pleased in Japan, largely due to the hesitancy of legislators to take legal actions against rogue organizations out of fear of trampling on the religious liberties of citizens. This has worked to the advantage of the UC, shielding it from government-imposed restrictions and allowing it to further expand the scope of its operations” (Nippon.com 2023).

That era of tolerance has come to an end as the astounding level of fraud has stoked anti-UC public sentiments, raising questions about how it managed to continue defrauding so many people for so much money over such a long period, especially after the post-1995 Aum crackdown on new religions (Mullins 2022). Suspicions focus on the LDP in general, and the Abe faction in particular, for providing political protection to the UC. The church remains unrepentant.

According to the lawyers’ network, the

Unification Church's claim "that there is no coercion of donations is a lie. The lawyers said there has been a string of civil court rulings in recent years pointing out the illegality of the donations to the religious group and ordering refunds to former followers" (Mainichi 2022b). Since 2009, there have been four court-ordered settlements amounting to 38 million yen, a miniscule fraction of the overall 123.7 billion yen in damage claims (UCA 2022). After the uproar in 2022, there has been an uptick of victims seeking restitution through court mediation involving billions of yen (Asahi 2023b, 2023c). In addition, there are privately arranged settlements, but these are subject to non-disclosure agreements, so it is hard to grasp the extent of restitution. Apparently, compensation is complicated and may be derailed in some cases because fraud victims lack documentation for the disputed transactions.

## Recruitment

Given that only 1% of Japanese are Christian, and most are indifferent to religion, the UC faced significant challenges in recruiting members. In 2018, the Nationwide Survey on the Japanese National Character found that 74% of Japanese indicated they have no personal religious faith (Sakurai 2022; also see National Character). Paradoxically, despite this professed lack of religious fervor, new religions have proliferated in Japan and there are some 180,000 groups registered with the government.

UC recruiters struggled in Japan because, "the heterodox doctrine provided by the UC would be uncompetitive compared with the orthodox doctrine of mainline churches in Japan. In addition, in the religious marketplace where a variety of new religions compete with one another, it is not so easy to attract Japanese people with a religion that only requires commitment and provides no guarantee of an

advantage over the secular world" (Sakurai 2019, 74). This may explain their extreme duplicity. The UC tactic relied on recruiters obscuring their religious affiliation when approaching potential recruits. According to Mark Mullins, a professor of Japanese studies and religion at the University of Auckland, "their recruitment methods are often based on false advertising and many encounter the movement at seminars that appear unrelated to the UC and are befriended. [They] only learn about the actual teachings after bonding with insiders" (Email September 17, 2023). He adds, "Recruitment does not appear to rely on the UC's religious appeal or, at least initially, on the charisma or teachings of Moon."

As the UC became increasingly toxic in the court of public opinion, recruiting became more difficult and deceitful. From the late 1960s, parents of recruits raised the alarm about "brainwashing" tactics and deceptive recruitment (Sakurai 2010, 322-323). The UC-affiliated Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP) targeted students at top schools, inviting them to join campus clubs and seminars without mentioning any religious connection. As Sakurai argues, recruiters "started with a mission strategy that disguised the UC as a social movement geared towards a world revolution for the young through its youth network, establishing J-CARP in 1964" (Sakurai 2019, 74). Gradually, recruits became embedded in a community that made it difficult for them to withdraw. The UC required them to isolate from family and non-UC friends, providing an opportunity to indoctrinate and initiate them into the church. Some recruits may have already been emotionally fragile and socially isolated. To some extent, the UC capitalized on widespread anomie and frustration among students that was expressed in the large demonstrations and campus violence in the late 1960s. Ideological differences generated tensions and turmoil that played to the advantage of the UC, a group that offered community and stability in exchange for



devotion to Moon's teachings. This appealed to a small niche of Japanese who sought a compelling mission that would imbue their lives with meaning and a spiritual dimension (Sakurai 2022).

From the 1980s, a spike of reporting about scandals related to fundraising, fraudulent sales and recruitment took a toll on the UC's revenues and recruitment on university campuses. As Sakurai observes, "Even worse, cult phobia and the anti-cult movement in Japan further accelerated the UC downturn of fund-raising and missionary activities" (Sakurai 2010, 323). With legal liabilities requiring costly compensation piling up in a string of court cases in the 1990s, the church shifted fundraising from the general public to its own members, asking for donations and loans in support of the UC's mission. Mass weddings and spiritual retreats in South Korea that members were pressured into attending generated further revenues. Subsequently, former members filed lawsuits against the UC, and in the early 2000s won many cases including a precedent regarding 'illegal recruitment.' In Sakurai's opinion, these plaintiffs "were able to win verdicts in the first decade of the twenty-first century because awareness of cult problems changed the respectful distance Japanese had kept from religious matters" (Sakurai 2010, 326).

The membership of UC in Japan peaked at an estimated 600,000 members in the 1990s. By 2020, the number of active members had fallen dramatically to some 60,000–70,000 as the children of the first generation drifted away from the UC and its heavy demands on their finances, time, and lifestyle (Sakurai 2022). The church insists on celibacy before marriage and intervenes in choosing marital partners, imposing demands that are out of synch with prevailing social norms. That might have been the appeal for the first generation recruited as students in the 1960s and 1970s, but it seems their children feel less obliged to make the

same sacrifices as their parents and find the church a stifling presence or worse. Indeed, following Abe's assassination, the mass media featured many interviews with this second generation, many of whom are bitter and describe their experience as akin to child abuse (McLaughlin 2023, 213). Furthermore, association with the UC carries a stigma as it is widely viewed as a cult and notorious for rip-off scams. It was also linked frequently to another new religion called Aum Shinrikyo, which conducted a terrorist attack in 1995 and was subsequently banned.

As a result, UC members are subject to social ostracism, testing their devotion and emotional resilience. They also lose control over their destiny, since the church chooses marriage partners and sends many members off to distant lands, separated from spouse and family, to engage in missionary work.

## Religion and Politics

With the global Cold War over and declining membership and revenues, what explains the continued appeal of the UC to the LDP? Firstly, the Cold War never ended in Asia, as divisions resulting from the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty persist between North and South Korea, and China and Taiwan, as does the US containment policy (Dower 2014). More importantly, after the LDP was ousted in 1993 for the first time since the party was established in 1955, it became more dependent on support outside its traditional base. In 1994, a new electoral system was introduced that changed how campaigns are waged. According to Koichi Nakano, a political scientist at Sophia University in Tokyo, this new electoral system helps explain why the LDP became even more dependent on "the UC supply of trained and experienced campaign organizers and its ability to deliver a solid block of votes" (Email August 18, 2023). He further observed, "The majority of a population does not have to be religious for

religion to influence a country's politics" (Imahashi and French 2022).

What's in a name? The church is officially recognized as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, after gaining government approval for changing the name from Unification Church (UC) in 2015 when Abe Shinzo was prime minister. This name change is controversial because previously the government stonewalled the UC's request to do so out of concern that it might compromise ongoing litigation against the church (Mainichi 2022a).

Significantly, the LDP has long worked closely with religious organizations and cooperates with the Buddhist Soka Gakkai-backed Komeito in its ruling coalition (Ehrhardt et al. 2014). In addition, the LDP maintains close ties with the National Shinto Shrines Association and the Japan Conference, an influential lobbying organization that advocates for a similar political agenda of "traditional values" (Mullins 2021). These organizations share the conservative LDP's agenda on opposing gay rights, gender equality, and diversity, while trumpeting family values. So too does the UC. Thus, it is not unusual that the UC has such an extensive network of ties with the LDP, including about half of its lawmakers in the Diet (Kyodo 2022). This was cloaked in secrecy until the media's postmortem on Abe's assassination, perhaps because this is the only one of those groups that has a judicial track record of scamming people and having devious recruiting methods.

Nonetheless, the LDP needs their labor. Abe Shinzo urged his colleagues to cooperate with the UC and was involved in allocating UC election support to them, including bloc votes and volunteer campaign workers (George Mulgan 2022). Candidates running on limited budgets can save several million yen by relying on UC volunteers, many of whom are experienced campaigners. Campaign workers

handing out leaflets, organizing rallies, staffing sound trucks, and so on are a godsend to LDP candidates who do not have koenkai (dynastic support organizations) to rely on.

In 2009, the LDP was again ousted from power, losing in a landslide to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The survivors in the decimated LDP tended to be more rightwing and hardline on social and geostrategic issues than many who lost their seats. From this rump, Abe Shinzo led the LDP's comeback in the 2012 elections and courted support wherever he could. Nonetheless, even in regaining power the LDP won one million less votes than in 2009 when it lost power, highlighting just how severe the electoral headwinds were.

Noting the key campaign role of religious organizations, Nakano observes, "This doesn't mean that the UC is more valuable than Soka Gakkai votes, for instance, or Shinto Seiji Renmei, but the point is that they don't need to be mutually exclusive because the whole strategy is to add them up. My guess is that only some become completely reliant on and hostage to the UC, but for most, the UC is one of the organized votes that they rely upon alongside other religions and vested interests" (Email August 18, 2023). The Soka Gakkai's political arm Komeito has been the junior partner in the LDP-led governing coalition since 1999. This also is a strange bedfellows alliance, because Komeito opposes LDP plans to revise Article 9 of the Constitution, which bans war and maintaining armed forces. Abe was especially keen to revise this article; when he resigned in 2020, he said his greatest regret was not being able to do so. Komeito is allocated a cabinet post in exchange for electoral coordination with the LDP about where to run, and not run, candidates in addition to urging the roughly 8 million members of Soka Gakkai to vote for LDP candidates. Komeito and LDP ties have become strained, but as Paul Nadeau observes, "Where LDP conservatives found common cause with

the Unification Church's anticommunism and reactionary politics, Komeito's pacifist inclinations have instead put a brake on a lot of the LDP's more stridently conservative priorities like constitutional revision and more extensive remilitarization. Yet there's been no interest in booting them, regardless of the disagreements, because frankly the LDP wouldn't be able to achieve its electoral majorities without them" (Nadeau 2023).

The Komeito helps mobilize an estimated 10,000–20,000 votes per single seat district, making it a crucial partner in many closely contested districts where LDP candidates score narrow victories of less than 10,000 votes (Nobira 2023). Nadeau adds that Komeito has forced the LDP to moderate its policies and focus on important social welfare issues, saving the party from a hardline agenda that alienates swing voters, thus broadening its appeal. Attesting to Soka Gakkai's election machine, in 2014 Komeito was credited with helping about one quarter of all LDP candidates win in single seat constituencies (Liff 2019). Yet its membership is aging and there is considerable dissatisfaction with Komeito's significant concessions to the LDP on security issues that appears to be undermining party loyalty and vote-gathering for the LDP. In the 2022 Upper House elections, Komeito candidates won almost 2 million votes less than the stated goal of 8 million and struggled with urban and younger voters. Like the UC, Soka Gakkai is facing a demographic crisis, but it is a vastly larger and more influential organization and Komeito, its political arm, is embedded in the ruling coalition with the fourth most seats (32) in the Diet.

### Anti-LGBTQ Advocacy

The LDP doesn't need much convincing to oppose gay rights, as was evident in 2023 when Japan's poor record on this issue drew international criticism at the G7 Summit in

Hiroshima; it is the only member that has not legalized gay marriage. Even under the spotlight, however, the LDP legislation aimed at quelling the clamor came up short, only banning "unfair discrimination" against the gay community, leaving unsaid what that might be (Lies 2023).

According to Nakano, "The exact influence of the UC on the LDP right's anti-LGBT policy, for example, is hard to gauge for at least two reasons. One is that the UC... is not by any means the only rightwing religion providing electoral support to the LDP right, and perhaps, not the biggest either in some cases. Second, many of the LDP candidates that benefit from UC support don't need the UC to convince them to be anti-LGBT—in other words, it may be more of mutual affinity than causality that is at work here" (Imahashi and French 2022).

Regarding gay rights, the UC may be pushing on an open door in the LDP, but it takes nothing for granted. To gain UC backing, candidates were obliged to pledge support for the UC stance on opposing gay rights at the local and provincial level (Nippon.com 2023). This grassroots activism by the UC and its affiliates is longstanding and widespread. For example, in 2019 in the town of Ginowan, Okinawa, the mayor was hoping to gain approval for an ordinance banning human rights violations and hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The former president of a UC-affiliated youth group gave a speech in Ginowan vehemently opposing same sex marriage and apparently had an impact (Imahashi and French 2022), because the gender equality ordinance that finally passed in 2020 was stripped of any reference to sexual orientation, gender identity, or hate speech.

LDP lawmaker Sugita Mio, a protégé of Abe known for her outspoken anti-gay comments, comfort women denialism, and criticism of

feminism, has been an invited speaker at UC-sponsored events, and she has enjoyed its strong support. In contrast, another conservative Abe protégé, Inada Tomomi, claims she not only lost UC support, but was also targeted by a postcard campaign in her constituency that urged local voters not to vote for her because of her pro-LGBTQ views (Imahashi and French 2022). According to Montana State University anthropologist Yamaguchi Tomomi, the UC's campaign for family values included, "blocking the introduction of separate surnames for married spouses, attacking sex education in schools, and resisting legalisation of same-sex marriage and partnerships" (Yamaguchi 2022). She adds, "the connection between the Unification Church and the LDP—particularly of the conservative Abe faction, and the possible influence that the Church may have on the policies supported by LDP politicians, may be one reason why Japan's progress on gender equality measures and LGBTQ+ rights has been so minimal—or even reversed—in recent years" (Yamaguchi 2022). No doubt, but this anti-gay stance has not resonated across Japan. Despite the church's strong opposition to same-sex partnership ordinances, between 2015–2022 a total of 223 municipalities covering half of Japan's population passed such measures.

### **The Politics of Disbandment**

As of October 2023, the Kishida government is seeking dissolution of the UC under the Religious Corporations Act. There was some hesitancy to call for the group's disbandment out of concern that this may violate the constitution, but political expediency combined with popular revulsion at its shady practices prevailed. An appeal of the decision is expected to end up in the Supreme Court's docket. The UC has countered that the dissolution order is unwarranted because it is complying with

restrictions on spiritual sales and soliciting donations and points to the sharp decline in lawsuits filed against it since the UC issued a compliance declaration in 2009 (Asahi 2023e).

Overall, Japan has a total of 180,000 registered religious organizations but only two, Aum Shinrikyo and the Myokakuji temple group, have been issued dissolution orders for harming public welfare significantly, and for violations of criminal laws. The Supreme Court took seven months to affirm the order for Aum due to various criminal acts, including the release of sarin gas in Tokyo's subway in 1995 that killed 14 commuters and injured nearly 6,000 others, while it took three years to finalize disbandment of Myokakuji for fraudulent practices similar to the UC's spiritual sales.

In October 2022, PM Kishida lowered the bar for disbanding the UC, declaring that a dissolution order could be issued if the UC violated civil law, retracting his statement in the Diet the previous day that such an order could only be issued if the UC was found to have violated criminal law (Asahi 2022b). In August 2022, Kishida made a similar reversal when he ordered LDP members to sever UC ties, backtracking on his initial stance defending members' freedom of religion as guaranteed by the Constitution (Imahashi and French 2022). In September 2023, unnamed government sources justified dissolution to reporters because the UC had engaged in "vicious, organized and continued activities that outweighed considerations of religious freedoms enshrined in the constitution" (Guardian 2023).

Dissolution would mean loss of status as a religious corporation and associated tax exemptions including property, corporate, and income levies. But the group could continue operating under a new name as Aum has done with Aleph, continuing to recruit new members and solicit donations. Sakurai asserts, "The

movement will doubtless reorganize itself and continue its activities. There's a limit to what legal regulation can accomplish. That's why we need to foster religious literacy and give people the tools to defend themselves" (2022).

The government can seek dissolution in cases where a religious organization "commits an act which is clearly found to harm public welfare substantially" and can prove malicious and illegal acts occurred continuously on an organizational level. However, "The church maintains its senior officials have never been implicated in a criminal case and that illegal activity breaking Japan's civil law would not constitute grounds for ordering its dissolution. It also says the government's questioning of the organization is illegal" (Kyodo 2023). That may well be, but the UC stands convicted in the court of public opinion, as there is overwhelming support for disbandment and virtually no opposition. Although there have been no criminal prosecutions, civil judgments against the UC are significant and show a well-established pattern of illegal behavior.

The political stakes are high, but the calculus is complex. Following Abe's assassination, there was a moral hysteria stoked by media reporting about which politicians had ties with the UC (McLaughlin 2023, 269). As Sakurai notes, the problem was that politicians hid their links to the UC because, "To publicly reveal that they were getting organizational support from a group that continued to harm the public through fraudulent 'spiritual sales' and excessive donation demands would be tantamount to admitting that they placed their own interests over the good of the country and its people" (2022). But beyond the moral panic factor, the anti-Moonie backlash may also reflect public empathy for those who were defrauded, as many know people who have been scammed. While people have been swindled by organizations other than the UC or by conmen, the public now has a target for their anger and frustration.

Soon after Abe's death, Kishida led the LDP to a thumping victory in the July Upper House elections, garnering a sympathy vote. Eager to capitalize on apparent public admiration for Abe, Kishida announced there would be a state funeral for Japan's longest serving prime minister, an initiative that was initially popular by nearly a two to one margin in polls. Kishida hoped that this plan would nurture support for himself in Abe's faction, where views of Kishida were mixed given his reputation for being a dovish moderate and for his criticism of Abenomics, asserting it has accentuated disparities, has not improved household income, and had not laid a foundation for sustainable growth. This was a gesture Kishida would come to regret as media revelations about the UC's extensive connections to Kishida's party, especially cabinet ministers, soured support for him and generated a powerful backlash against the state funeral. Less than a month after Abe's killing, public opinion flipped to a hefty margin against a state funeral, 53 percent opposed versus 30 percent in favor (Mainichi 2022c). Remarkably, as North Carolina State University's Levi McLaughlin observes, "Abe's murder by a gunman motivated by hatred of a much-maligned new religion revived memories of panic about Aum and triggered sympathy for the murderer" (2023, 211).

Kishida tried reshuffling his cabinet in August 2022, a common ploy aimed at hitting the reset button and improving public support, but this too backfired when many of the new cabinet appointees were also found to have UC ties. Suddenly, Kishida, who had been cruising along with high levels of public support, found himself engulfed in a massive scandal. In desperation, Kishida acceded to public pressure by banning LDP members from having ties with the UC and launching probes into the UC activities and finances aimed at determining if it should lose its legal status as a religious organization.

The damage control includes a new law passed in December 2022 that is designed to help victims gain restitution for financial losses due to “unscrupulous fundraising practices perpetrated by religious organizations and other groups” (Asahi 2023a). The law provides recourse to those defrauded by aggressive and repeated demands for large donations and bans various coercive and deceptive solicitation techniques, including what are deemed excessive donations linked to so-called spiritual sales (*reikan shoho*), allowing cancellation of such donations by the donor up to ten years afterwards. Groups are also banned from asking people to sell property or borrow money to make donations; violation risks a maximum one-year prison term and a fine of up to one million yen. The law also permits the government to name and shame any organization involved in inappropriate donations. After two years from enactment, the law will be reviewed, providing an opportunity for revision. The new law also confers sweeping discretionary powers on the government in determining what actions constitute a violation of the law. For example, the law establishes vague criteria for determining whether donations were made voluntarily or collected inappropriately, leaving the court to decide if the individual’s free will has been compromised or if the donor was put in a situation where it became difficult to make a reasonable decision.

Although this law potentially provides recourse to relatives of donors that have suffered severe financial distress due to unscrupulous fundraising tactics, it has attracted considerable criticism for making it difficult for families to recover donations. The National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales called the law “totally insufficient” because it curtails the rights of children and other family members to cancel donations by their relatives (Asahi 2022c). This group advocates creating a third-party body to cancel and manage donations and restitution under the supervision

of a family court. It has also called on the Diet to review the legislation and clarify what exactly is prohibited in order to facilitate restitution. Donations can be cancelled if donors were in a “state of confusion” due to intimidation, coercion, mind control, or deception, but proving that may be difficult. It will also be hard to disprove church claims that many donors turned over their wealth out of a sense of mission with the intention of benefiting their families. One controversial clause of the bill that was added following Diet debate requires that there should be sufficient consideration of the “free will” of donors, a provision that will make it difficult to challenge and cancel donations (Asahi 2022c).

A post-dissolution future is possible, but the UC’s decline will probably accelerate in terms of members and revenues. It is curious, then, that given the swirling controversies and mounting doubts about the UC’s future, it purchased in April 2022 a large building and tract of land in the Tama suburbs west of Tokyo with a lump sum payment of 940 million yen with intentions to build a new training site next to Kokushikan University and a metropolitan high school, indicating that its pockets remain deep and its ambitions resilient. The local mayor and townspeople have spoken out against these plans, raising questions about the source of funding and collecting 44,000 signatures on a petition protesting construction plans. Kokushikan University expressed concerns about an unfavorable impact on the educational environment. This public pushback is not new, but is bolstered by the prevailing anti-UC trend. After ongoing demolition work is completed, the UC faces a difficult decision, “Regarding the subsequent construction of a new facility, the cult stated, ‘We will consider this while keeping an eye on the national trend regarding requests for dissolution’” (Tokyo Shimbun 2023).

## Conclusion

The UC is facing an existential crisis. The government and public are demanding it atone for its bad karma accumulated over six decades of dubious and devious practices that have inflicted substantial harm on many people. In contrast, the LDP must have breathed a collective sigh of relief that the taint of association with the UC did not carry electoral consequences. Despite grim predictions, LDP candidates won most of the local elections they contested across Japan in May 2023. The UC was not a scarlet letter for these candidates, perhaps because the moral panic subsided, and the media moved on to other scandals. Yet the government remains in damage control mode, pushing forward with disbanding the UC, an initiative that is immensely popular in public opinion polls. On September 11, 2023, NHK news announced that 68% support the government's plan to seek dissolution of the UC while only 1% oppose this initiative (NHK 2023). Since November 2022, the Ministry of Education, which oversees religious groups, sent a series of questionnaires to the UC regarding its practices, lawsuits, compliance with guidelines, financial affairs details on donations, overseas money transfers, and budgets. The UC has submitted replies by specified deadlines, but the government asserts that it has not adequately answered numerous questions about "shady business practices" and has apparently not responded to about 20% of the queries (Asahi 2023e). In addition, the costs of restitution are gathering as the pace of negotiated settlements accelerates. Funding these settlements will be more fodder for media coverage and further undermine the UC's claims of victimization. The UC announced plans to allocate up to 10 billion yen (\$68 million) to cover compensation claims over forced donations, but lawyers estimate that total claims may exceed 100 billion yen. This funding gap highlights the importance of a law passed by the Diet in December 2023 to monitor UC assets. The bill mandates

notification of the government before any real estate sales, but stops short of freezing the group's assets. Lawyers asserted, "The law will not effectively prevent the church from hiding its assets because it lacks the necessary provisions to preserve them" (Asahi 2023f). As finalization of the UC's dissolution will take time, there are thus incentives and opportunities to transfer church assets that may jeopardize compensation of its many victims.

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**Jeff Kingston** is Professor of History and Asian Studies at Temple University Japan. His recent monographs include *Japan in Transformation 1945–2020* (2021), *The Politics of Religion, Nationalism and Identity in Asia* (2019), *Japan* (2019) and *Nationalism in Asia: A History Since 1945* (2016). He edited *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan* (2019) and *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan* (2017), and co-edited *The Routledge Handbook of Trauma in East Asia* (2023), *Japan in the Heisei Era (1989–2019)* (2022), *Press Freedom in Contemporary Asia* (2020), *Japan’s Foreign Relations with Asia* (2018) and *Asian Nationalisms Reconsidered* (2015). His current research focuses on transitional justice and the politics of memory. He holds a BSFS from Georgetown University and a PhD from Columbia University.