

JAPAN 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government closely monitored the state of religious freedom, conducted outreach to minority religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and discussed religious freedom with the government.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 127.2 million (July 2013 estimate). The government does not require religious groups to report their membership, and it is therefore difficult to determine the number of members of different groups. A 2011 report by the government's Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA) indicates that membership claims by religious groups totaled 196 million. This number, substantially more than the country's population, reflects many citizens' affiliation with multiple religions. For example, it is common to have both Buddhist and Shinto beliefs. (Shinto is the indigenous religion of ethnic Japanese.)

According to the ACA's 2011 statistics, 100 million persons identified themselves as Shinto, 84 million as Buddhist, and 1.9 million as Christian, while nine million followed other religions. The category of "other" includes Islam, the Bahai Faith, Hinduism, and Judaism.

There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity, politics, or socio-economic status; society is relatively ethnically and religiously homogeneous. The indigenous Ainu people, who mainly practice an animist faith, were once concentrated in northern Honshu and Hokkaido, though many now live in the greater Tokyo area. Most immigrants and foreign workers practice religions other than Buddhism or Shinto.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

According to the ACA, approximately 182,000 religious groups are certified by the central government as well as by prefectural governments as religious groups with corporate status. The large number reflects local units of religious groups registering separately. The government does not require religious groups to register or apply for certification, but certified religious groups receive tax benefits.

The law provides the government with some authority to supervise certified religious groups. The law requires certified religious groups to disclose their assets to the government and empowers the government to investigate possible violations of regulations governing for-profit activities. Authorities have the right to suspend a religious group's for-profit activities if the group violates these regulations.

Government Practices

The government granted temporary humanitarian protective status to Chinese individuals who were Falun Gong (also referred to as Falun Dafa) practitioners, though during the year one individual was refused this status and directed to the Immigration Control Bureau. The temporary humanitarian status allowed Falun Gong adherents to remain in the country and to travel overseas using travel documents issued by the government.

The government did not grant refugee status to 47 Muslim Rohingyas who came to Japan because they feared ethnic and religious persecution in Burma. Most of these individuals have resided in Japan more than five years, and some for more than 15 years. Some reportedly entered the country illegally and were not associated with any formal resettlement program. The government issued temporary stay visas to Rohingyas without refugee status; the visas required frequent renewal. In addition, the temporary status carried some legal risk of deportation, although no one was deported to Burma.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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While the number of reported “deprogramming” cases involving Unification Church (UC) members has declined sharply since the 1990s, the NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers International stated that abductions and deprogramming of UC members continued to occur. The UC reported three cases in which church members were abducted. UC members visited the homes of the members’ family after members went “missing” and contacted police. All three individuals later resurfaced and sent communications to the UC withdrawing from the church.

The UC asserted that certain universities unfairly targeted the organization in “cult prevention” workshops that aimed to caution students about joining such groups. UC representatives noted, however, that universities did not refer to the UC by name in these workshops, possibly due to a series of suits brought against academic institutions throughout the country by the UC. The organization’s representatives also responded to criticism of surreptitious recruitment by noting that the church stopped hiding its name during recruitment activities in 1992, although this could not be independently confirmed.

The UC brought a case to arbitration against Chiba University in January after a professor and university administrator questioned 10 students regarding their faith and asked them to leave a student group affiliated with the UC. The UC was awarded damages and the professor resigned her post in April.

The National Police Agency (NPA) said that it monitored the UC for possible criminal activities, citing arrests in the past for violations of laws governing sales techniques including telemarketing and multilevel marketing, as well as laws governing the production and distribution of pharmaceuticals. Police also reported isolated cases of trespassing and stalking, and stated that they monitored for possible coerced donations. A former UC member brought a civil suit against the church seeking the return of 32.5 million yen (\$309,494) in allegedly forced donations.

While society was generally supportive of the right of Falun Gong practitioners to practice freely, the Chinese embassy in Tokyo reportedly carried out a campaign to persuade Japanese organizations to discriminate against Falun Gong practitioners. Falun Gong members also asserted that major newspapers inflated costs for advertising Falun Gong activities, or failed to apply a standard advertising discount.

Significant interfaith efforts continued during the year. The Japanese Association of Religious Organizations, an interfaith NGO, promoted religious culture and

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interfaith harmony. It sponsored the 40th National Interreligious Consultation for Peace in September, bringing together over 100 officers and supporting members of Religions for Peace Japan, the national branch of a worldwide coalition of representatives from world religions dedicated to promoting peace. The event stressed the need for interfaith dialogue and highlighted beliefs shared by different faiths. Members of the Islamic Center continued to speak at churches and participated in interfaith peace prayers with Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy closely monitored the status of religious freedom, conducted outreach to minority religious groups and NGOs, and discussed religious freedom with the government.

Embassy representatives met with a variety of faith-based groups and religious leaders. Embassy officers discussed the Jewish community and its interactions in local society with a local rabbi. Embassy representatives spoke with UC leaders about religious kidnappings and forced conversions. Embassy officers met with representatives of the majority-Muslim Rohingya population, who reported the Japanese government's reluctance to grant refugee status to Rohingyas fearing religious persecution in Burma. Embassy staff spoke with a representative of the Islamic Center, who provided an overview of the government's relations with the Muslim community and described interfaith efforts in which his organization was involved. He said the members of his center reported no restrictions on their ability to worship freely. Embassy representatives also met with Falun Gong practitioners to learn about concerns they reported.