

FOREF Europe: Media's Power - Uplifting or Undermining Religious Freedom

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May 7, 2025



The Fragile Balance of Press Freedom and Religious Liberty: The Harmful Impact of Stigmatizing Language

Published on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2025

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On World Press Freedom Day, we celebrate journalism's role in holding power to account and amplifying the voices of the vulnerable. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) enshrines freedom of expression as a pillar of democracy. But this freedom is not without consequence. When media outlets stigmatize religious minorities, they don't just shape narratives - they shape realities.

The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), protected under Article 18 of the UDHR, is not in tension with press freedom - it is bound to it. When one is compromised, both suffer.

Across democratic societies, peaceful faith communities are increasingly targeted not by the state alone, but by a media culture that recycles old prejudices in new packaging. Labels like "sect" or "cult" - lacking legal or academic definition - are used to delegitimize entire belief systems. These terms carry historical weight and modern danger: they incite fear, provoke hostility, and open the door to discrimination, violence, and even legal erasure.

Austria: When a Broadcaster Crosses the Line

One recent example in Austria reveals how public broadcasting can blur the line between journalism and defamation. In a 2-minute-13-second report, ORF Mittagsjournal - Austria's national broadcaster - used the word "Sekte" (cult) twelve times to describe the Unification Church, a legally recognized faith community under Austrian law with no record of misconduct. Its members contribute to society through peacebuilding, education, and interfaith dialogue.

ORF justified its language by citing a Japanese court ruling dissolving a related group over alleged civil violations. But it omitted critical facts: that the Church is protected under Austrian law; that no wrongdoing has been reported locally; and that the Japanese decision has been condemned by leading international human rights advocates. Among them are participants of the IRF Roundtable, Human Rights Without Frontiers, and speakers at the IRF Summit 2025, all of whom see the ruling as a violation of international FoRB standards.

Austria's 1998 Recognition Act guarantees equal protection to recognized religious communities. By ignoring this and repeating stigmatizing language, ORF helped legitimize prejudice. A Church spokesperson formally requested a correction - none was issued. Such reporting doesn't just misinform; it emboldens hate. In neighboring Germany, neo-Nazi extremists recently attacked Hare Krishna devotees - violence fueled by decades of media framing minority faiths as dangerous "sects."

A European Pattern

Austria is not alone. In Germany, state and media actors have long labeled groups like Scientology and Hare Krishna as "anti-democratic" without judicial basis. These designations have led to surveillance, job loss, and social ostracism.

In France, the discredited 1995 Parliamentary Report on Sects listed 172 groups - from Christian Scientists to Antoinists - as threats to public order, despite no criminal evidence. Today, MIVILUDES, the state's anti-cult task force, continues to issue alerts that the media repeat without question, shaping both public sentiment and policy.

These terms have no legal precision - yet they carry devastating weight. Despite multiple rulings by the European Court of Human Rights affirming the rights of minority religions, stigmatizing labels remain embedded in public discourse.

Global consequences: Media as an accelerant

The consequences of distorted media narratives are felt worldwide - and are often deadly.

In Myanmar, anti-Muslim rhetoric helped lay the groundwork for the Rohingya genocide. In Pakistan, media-fueled accusations of heresy against Ahmadi Muslims often end in mob violence.

China: Media-driven cultural genocide

In China, state propaganda systematically demonizes religious minorities who are considered a threat to the ideology of the Communist Party. Falun Gong practitioners have been vilified as an "evil cult" since the 1999 ban, a label that justifies mass detention, torture, and organ harvesting. The China Tribunal, an independent panel, documented that Falun Gong adherents and other minorities such as Uyghurs are targeted victims of state-organized organ trafficking.

Since 2017, over a million Uyghurs in Xinjiang have been interned in so-called "re-education camps," where they are subjected to forced labor, cultural eradication, and political indoctrination. State media portray this as "vocational training," while reports of torture, forced sterilization, and the demolition of mosques are ignored. Tibetans suffer a similar fate: monasteries are destroyed, the Tibetan language is suppressed, and the Dalai Lama is defamed as a "separatist." These narratives, spread by state-controlled media, legitimize cultural genocide.

Russia: State Media as a Tool of Repression

In Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned as an "extremist organization" in 2017, a move that was prepared by years of state-orchestrated media campaigns. State media outlets such as Rossiya 24 and RT portrayed the group as a threat to national security, despite no evidence of criminal behavior. After the ban, over 180,000 members were forced underground, hundreds were detained, and many reported torture and house searches. State media played a central role in rallying public support for the persecution and suppressing dissent. This case shows how media can be used as a tool of state repression.

In India, nationalist outlets inflame religious tensions, targeting Christians and Muslims. The 2022 U.S. State Department Report warns that media bias plays a growing role in triggering violence.

Nigeria: The Hidden Tragedy of Christians

In Nigeria, the persecution of Christians remains one of the least reported human rights crises. Between 2020 and 2024, according to Open Doors, over 14,000 Christians were killed by extremist groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and radicalized Fulani militias. In 2023 alone, over 5,000 Christians were murdered, thousands of churches destroyed, and hundreds of thousands displaced. Yet global media coverage remains patchy, and the religious motive is often omitted. This silence promotes impunity and signals to persecutors that the world will look away. In regions with weak state protection, the media's failure to report the truth allows suffering to continue unabated.

Silence is complicity. When the media remain silent about the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, they are not only failing as journalists - they are complicit. Over 14,000 dead in four years, thousands of churches destroyed - and hardly any reporting. Democracy dies in darkness. When journalists conceal "crimes against humanity," they violate their ethical duty to truthfulness. Silence does not protect the victims, but encourages the perpetrators.

Japan: Media witch hunt with global consequences

In Japan, media smear campaigns have reached unprecedented levels. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, the Unification Church was branded a "cult" in over 4,000 articles, even though there was no connection to the crime. The assassin, T. Yamagami, acted out of personal motives, but the media used the tragedy to unleash a witch hunt. Under this pressure, the government took legal action, which led to the dissolution of the church by the Tokyo District Court on March 25, 2025. The appeal is pending, but the damage to society is immense: children are being bullied, companies are terminating contracts, and banks are refusing to provide services. If the appeal fails, all assets will be seized and churches will be closed - an unprecedented destruction of a legal religious community without any criminal basis.

This process is a wake-up call for democracies worldwide. Japan, the third-largest economy and a supposedly stable democracy, is trampling on fundamental principles such as religious freedom and the rule of law. Dictatorial and autocratic regimes are rubbing their hands with glee as they watch a democratic nation set such precedents. The "copycat effect" is inevitable: authoritarian states could use Japan's actions as a blueprint to suppress religious minorities under the guise of media and political unpopularity.

International voices, including former US Ambassador Sam Brownback, former Speaker Newt Gingrich, and USCIRF Co-Chair Katrina Lantos-Swett, condemn this as a direct attack on democracy. European experts such as Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Willy Fautre, and Dr. Aaron Rhodes also warn that Japan is opening a Pandora's box that could have global repercussions.

A Digital Age of Echo Chambers - and Resistance

In our hyper-connected world, disinformation spreads fast - and stigma spreads faster. In Bangladesh, a false social media post about a Quran desecration during Durga Puja in 2021 triggered deadly riots. The line between rumor and journalism collapses quickly.

Yet resistance is growing. Platforms like Bitter Winter, FOREF Europe, CESNUR, HRWF and independent scholars continue to challenge false narratives, document abuse, and defend conscience.

Courts are taking note. In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in *Association of Jehovah's Witnesses of Romania v. Romania* that derogatory language by public authorities - when echoed by the media - can violate religious freedom under Article 9 of the ECHR.

Recommendations

To safeguard both freedom of the press and freedom of religion or belief, the following actions are urgently needed:

Eliminate stigmatizing language such as "cult" or "sect," unless supported by objective, legal evidence. Just as society has largely removed racial slurs like the "N-word" from responsible discourse, we must also reject religious slurs that dehumanize entire communities. Use accurate, neutral terms such as "faith community" or "new religious movement."

Provide training for journalists on FoRB principles, religious literacy, and cultural sensitivity to prevent the spread of harmful stereotypes.

Ensure media accountability through ombudspersons, independent press councils, and public responses to unbalanced or defamatory content.

Support independent journalism and watchdog organizations that uphold both press freedom and the rights of religious minorities.

Urge governments and international bodies to refrain from adopting or promoting anti-cult narratives that violate international human rights norms.

As UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Nazila Ghanea warned in 2023, "direct violence against marginalized religious communities often goes hand in hand with legally mandated discrimination" - much of it fueled by biased media.

Conclusion: A Test of Integrity

World Press Freedom Day is more than a tribute - it is a test. Will the press stand with the voiceless, or with the mob? Will it defend Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR - or betray them in pursuit of sensationalism and scapegoats?

In this fragile global moment, integrity matters more than ever. We must demand a journalism rooted in truth, not tribalism; in context, not caricature. Only then can freedom of expression and freedom of belief coexist - not in conflict, but in common cause for justice.



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