

Conference Promotes Religious Freedom as A Human Right

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The Chinese Communist Party is “at war with all faiths,” according to former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, who says America and its democratic allies must “stand firmly” in promoting religious freedom as a “common human right.”

Mr. Brownback, who held the post under former President Trump, made the assertions to an international conference Friday aimed at advancing freedom of faith amid attacks on religious freedom in China, North Korea, Japan, the Middle East, and elsewhere around the world.

The event, live-streamed from South Korea, called out what organizers described as the “unjustified persecution” of members of the Unification Church, whose followers say they’ve faced death threats and other forms of harassment in Japan since the July assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Mr. Abe was shot by a gunman who claimed to have a personal grievance with the church — his mother made large donations to it — and is reported to have targeted the former prime minister for having appeared at events sponsored by the church, which has long been active in Japan.

Some speakers at Friday’s conference homed in on the issue, with former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich voicing concern that those pushing “discriminatory actions” against Unificationists in Japan “are really seeking to weaken the security and peace of Japan, making Japan weaker in the face of threats from China and [North Korea].”

Pastor Paula White-Cain, a spiritual adviser to Mr. Trump during his presidency, also raised the issue, stressing that many current and former leaders worldwide have spoken in support of the Unification movement’s decades-old fight against communism and promotion of peace and strong families.

“That’s why it is no surprise that Prime Minister Abe stood with many heads of state in appreciating this work because it is good for Japan, good for the Republic of Korea and for America and good for peace in Northeast Asia and the world,” said Pastor White of the Florida-based City of Destiny Church.

Mr. Brownback, meanwhile, said “religious freedom is a hallmark of an open society in a democracy.”

“The United States, Japan [and] South Korea [are] key democracies that must stand for religious freedom for everybody everywhere all the time,” he said.

Mr. Brownback, who is also a former Republican Senator from Kansas and a former governor of that state, went on to assert that “faith is the one institution that has the strength to bring down a government.”

For that reason, he said, China’s ruling communist party “looks and says, ‘we’re going to stop this. We’re coming at war with this.’”

Friday’s gathering, officially titled a “Conference of Hope for Universal Human Rights,” featured in-person and virtual presentations from a range of political and religious dignitaries. It was organized by The Washington Times Foundation and Think Tank 2022, a Korean Peninsula reunification initiative sponsored by the Unification Church, also known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

Speakers called out the full range of religious persecution by authoritarian governments, shining a light on the plight of Tibetan Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Bahais, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Yazidis and Falun Gong followers and Unificationists.

Several spoke of the North Korean and Chinese governments’ intolerance towards freedom of faith. Some homed in particularly on the plight of Muslims within China’s minority ethnic Uyghur population, against whom Beijing is committing genocide, according to the U.S. State Department.

Others focused their remarks on the philosophical tenets of religious freedom.

“Religious liberty long has been called the first freedom,” said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties with Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank.

“Of course, other liberties also are important, even vital. But the foundation upon which they rest is the right to seek the transcendent and understand one’s role in life,” he said.

“People’s relationship with (or without) God is up to them and no one else, especially the state, despite its pretense of omniscience,” Mr. Bandow told the conference in prepared remarks. “This essential liberty is under attack around the world. The greatest threats come from oppressive governments, determined to supplant religious belief for their own purposes.”

Conference organizers said in a press release that a highlight of the event was the adoption of a “Declaration on the Universal Value of Religious Freedom” calling on “all people throughout the world to stand firm against all forms of religious intolerance, prejudice, slander, and hate.”

With that as a backdrop, Mr. Gingrich highlighted the work of the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon, an ardent anti-communist, who founded the Unification Church in 1954.

Rev. Moon’s wife, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, has headed the Unification movement since Rev. Moon died in 2012. Together, the two devoted their lives to reunifying the Korean Peninsula and promoting world peace. They founded The Washington Times in 1982.

Mr. Gingrich spoke of the movement’s decades-long battle against communism, noting that the movement has long included “a large base of patriotic Japanese citizens” and early on featured the formation of the “International Federation for Victory Over Communism.”

“This movement has been strongly supporting Japan’s freedom, prosperity and its role as a leader for peace and security,” Mr. Gingrich said.

“We are seeing that many in the media are trying to dissolve the movement in Japan without any legal due process,” he said. “We’ve also found that many are politically sympathetic to the communist or socialist anti-religious, anti-America and anti-Abe view.”

“We believe that Japan will uphold its commitment to freedom of religion and democracy,” Mr. Gingrich said.