Official inquiry into Japanese ruling party’s ties to right-wing cult

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On October 17, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced that his government would open an investigation into the Unification Church, a far-right organization with deep ties to his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). These ties, coupled with anger over Tokyo’s war drive and deteriorating economic conditions, have generated widespread public anger, which the Kishida administration hopes to dissipate in what will amount to a whitewash.

The investigation, based on Japan’s Religious Corporations Law, is focusing on the dishonest manner in which the Unification Church—a cult—collects donations, and could potentially lead to the group being ordered to disband. Many in Japan view the organization as a criminal organization, with the revelation of its close ties to numerous right-wing LDP politicians generating shock and anger.

LDP Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi reported on September 8 that at least 179 of the 379 party members in the National Diet have some connection to the Unification Church.

Speaking to the National Diet’s Lower House Budget Committee session, Kishida stated that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) would conduct the investigation into the Unification Church. “Although large numbers of people have suffered and many families collapsed and were broken (by the organization), measures to save victims have yet to be sufficiently taken. The government takes this situation very seriously,” he claimed.

The day after announcing the investigation, Kishida said that his government would draw up a relief package bill for victims of the Unification Church and submit it to the current session of the Diet soon. Details of the package have yet to be released. Opposition parties have backed the proposed idea, with the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the right-wing Nippon Ishin no Kai presenting their own joint bill on October 17, aimed at supposedly helping victims of the cult’s scams.

The Unification Church is formally known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, though it is often referred to as the Moonies, in reference to its founder Sun Myung Moon. It was established in South Korea in 1954 and has a long history of promoting religious obscurantism while pushing an ideology virulently hostile to the working class and to socialism.

The LDP’s ties to the Moonies came into the public spotlight following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8 in Nara. The suspected assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, targeted Abe after seeing him appear in a video for a group affiliated with the cult. Yamagami reportedly wrote in a letter a day before the assassination, stating, “After my mother joined the church (in the 1990s), my entire teenage years were gone, with some 100 million yen ($US665,000) wasted.” He is currently being held for psychiatric evaluation until November 29.

However, Kishida only ordered the current inquiry into the group more than three months after Abe’s assassination. It is also being wrapped up in bureaucratic red-tape with MEXT scheduled to begin studying how to conduct the investigation on October 25.

The Kishida administration ultimately hopes the investigation will deflect the growing discontent towards his government and the LDP. An October 13 the Jiji Press poll found only 27.4 percent approved of the current administration. Kishida was already forced to reshuffle his cabinet on August 10 in an attempt to
distance his government from the scandal surrounding
the Unification Church.

Public anger, however, is not simply directed at the
Moonies’ reactionary behavior or the LDP’s ties to the
group, but at the far-right orientation of the entire
political establishment that these ties represent. The
working class faces worsening living conditions while
Tokyo has joined Washington in a war drive against
China. Japan also recently experienced its most deadly
COVID-19 wave, with millions infected this past
summer. Tens of thousands continue to be infected
daily.

As of August, real wages had fallen for five straight
months as consumer prices have risen at the fastest
pace in eight years, according to the latest government
figures. In August and July respectively, real wages fell
by 1.7 percent and 1.8 percent over the previous year.

Kishida’s attempt to glorify Abe’s legacy of
remilitarization and attacks on the working class
through an unprecedented state funeral on September
27 for the former prime minister also met with
widespread anger. Public opinion polling found that as
many as 56 percent of people were opposed to the
funeral. People taking part in protests against the
funeral denounced Abe’s pro-war record, the
government’s removal of COVID-19 safety measures,
and the huge price tag for the event, which came to 1.2
billion yen ($US8 million).

In the investigation of the Unification Church, the
government wants to ensure none of these issues are
addressed. The focus on the Moonies’ dishonest
practices is meant to obfuscate and distract from the
LDP’s deep and longstanding ties with this and other
far-right organizations on which the LDP relies for
political support, especially in elections.

Speaking to the *Nikkei Asia* in September, Koichi
Nakano, a professor of political science at Sophia
University in Tokyo, called the extensive ties between
the Moonies and the LDP “shocking.” He explained
that in the 1990s, “The LDP got closer to the church
and moved even further to the right, in an effort to
differentiate itself as much as possible from the
[Democrats], which seemed left-wing and dangerous.”

Other far-right groups include Nippon Kaigi, an ultra-
nationalist group that counts numerous politicians
among its members, including Prime Minister Kishida
and large numbers of LDP members including those in
the cabinet. Nippon Kaigi promotes historical
revisionism, remilitarization, emperor worship, and a
return to “traditional” values.

The Unification Church scandal is a further
demonstration of the extreme right-wing character of
the government and the fragility of bourgeois
democracy in Japan. The LDP utilizes its longstanding
ties to far-right organizations to prop up its unpopular
rule, allowing the LDP to remain in power with
supposed “mandates” from the public after each
election.

By reducing the issued to one of personal ties to the
cult, the official investigation is meant to hide the
operations of the LDP as a whole. Undoubtedly, a more
in-depth analysis of the ties of all the parties would
expose a host of practices and interconnections the
ruling class would like to keep from public view.

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