

Research Article**Communicating through a Scandal: The Case Study of Japan
LDP's Ties with the Unification Church**

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The existing literature on political scandals predominantly focuses on their detrimental effects on society at large. This paper aims to offer an alternative perspective, arguing that political scandals can lead to positive change. It does so by examining the case of Japan's ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its ties to the controversial religious organization, the Unification Church (UC). These ties were brought into public attention, following the assassination of the former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. Drawing on the framework of scandal mediation process (Prusa, 2010), this paper defines scandal as a form of communication between the elite and the masses, that facilitated by the media. By consulting data from newspapers and government reports, this paper investigates the progression of the scandal. It highlights how the communication unfolded during the progression of the scandal through public pressure, intense media coverage, public apologies by members of the political elites, and attempts to mitigate the damage. Moreover, this paper argues that the swift response from the government, notably the passing of anti-malicious donation law, shows that a political scandal can positively impact the functioning of social order. Focusing on how and under what circumstance a political scandal may have a positive impact introduces a richer nuance to the discussion of Japanese political scandals as demonstrated by these findings.

Keywords: Scandal; Japan; History; Religion; Politics**1. Introduction**

In mid-2022, the media revealed that several legislators from the Japanese ruling political party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), received campaign donations from a controversial religious organization, the Unification Church (the UC). This revelation led to public outcry and months of intense media coverage, which exposes how the party became embroiled in a political scandal.

Political scandals are an integral part of any democratic society, including Japan. While scandals are found in various

areas including entertainment and sports, political scandals arguably draw the most attention from both the public and scholars alike. In the context of political scandal, the moral transgression or the violation of norms involved either politicians or political institutions and is considered to have a wider impact on society at large. Various studies have shown that political scandals negatively affect the political institution or individual involved, contributing to a drop in approval ratings or fueling public apathy towards politicians or the government.

The existing literature on political scandals has heavily relied on cases from Western countries with strong democratic institutions, such as the United States, Western Europe, and Scandinavian countries (Maier, 2011; Paschall et al., 2020; Rottinghaus, 2014). However, political scandals in non-Western democratic countries remain under-explored. To enrich the literature on political scandals, this paper proposes the case of Japan.

The rationale for choosing Japan as a case study is twofold. First, it meets the criteria of an advanced democratic country, scoring high in two indicators namely political freedom and civil liberty (Freedom House, 2022). Second, Japan's distinct cultural values, rooted in collectivism and hierarchy, are often considered to be at odds with the so-called western values such as individualism and egalitarian principles, which provide a fascinating case study (Pempel, 1992).

Reviewing the literature, the nature of political scandals in Japan is divided into two main categories: those attributable to policy failures and those constituting corruption. An important work on corruption scandals is presented by Iga and Auerbach (1977). Using the case of political corruption involving the Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka in the 1970s, they demonstrate the linkage between Japanese political structure and corruption. Similar findings are shown by Chalmer Johnson (1986), who argues that Japan tends to be more permissive towards the corrupt practices of powerful individual. Indeed, much of the discussion on Japanese political scandals has emphasized on how and why the Japanese structural system tends to be more tolerant toward corruption

(Blechinger, 1999; Carlson, 2020; Iga & Auerbach, 1977; Johnson, 1986; Nyblade & Reed, 2008)

Another important work on scandal is introduced by (Carlson, 2017). Instead of focusing on corruption, he explored how political scandals erupted because of bureaucratic incompetence. Carlson's findings show how incompetence can be as scandalous as frivolous and corrupt practices.

While the nature of scandals might vary, they always call for active participation from the media (Prusa, 2010, 2022; Zulli, 2021). Thus, this paper defines scandal as a 'mediated form of communication' (Prusa, 2010). By defining scandal as a form of elite-mass communication facilitated by the media, it provides a workable framework to unpack the complex progression of a scandal.

Scandals can be long and arduous events, full of twists and turns. However, following the framework offered by Prusa (2010), Japanese scandals can be narrowed down to three main phases: the processing of the scandal, which provides a contextual explanation of how an event is considered a scandal; the revelation to the public; and the climax, which includes attempts to mitigate the damages.

Drawing from this framework, the primary aim of this paper is to understand the dynamics of scandal in contemporary Japan from a historical and institutional context. It examines a political scandal that exposed the ties between the lawmakers from of Japan's leading political party, the LDP, and the controversial religious organization, the Unification Church. These ties were brought to the surface following the assassination of the Japanese former Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe.

By examining the sequence of a scandal, this paper aims to shed a light on the dynamic of scandal in contemporary Japan. At the end of the sequence, this paper shows a positive outcome brought by the scandal, namely the passing of anti-malicious donation law. In the discourse that dominated by detrimental effect of scandals, this finding provides a different interpretation of how political scandal can have a beneficial legislative outcome.

2. Methods

This paper employs the three steps of analysis outlined by Prusa (2010) to understand the dynamics of the scandal. First, the initial phase: the paper pinpoints the moment when the scandal erupted. Scandals do not exist in a vacuum; instead, they occur within specific historical and institutional contexts that shape how the public perceives the ties between the LDP and UC as scandalous. This section provides a brief historical overview of UC's activities in Japan and explores the relationship between politics and religion in Post War Japan. It also examines the connections between Japan's major political party and a controversial religious organization within this backdrop.

Second, the middle phase: it investigates the revelation of the LDP-UC ties in early 2022, following the assassination of the former Prime Minister Abe. This assassination triggers extensive coverage of UC's operations in Japan, including its political activities. This section places special emphasis on the UC-LDP political ties, campaign donations and electoral support, which constitute the core scandal addressed in this paper.

Third, the concluding phase: this section analyses the response of the

government following the scandal, including corrective measures from both political and legal perspectives. Here, this paper introduces how, and under what circumstance, a scandal may facilitate positive improvement in society.

The data consulted in this paper are drawn from newspapers, regulatory bodies, and government reports.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 The Background: the Controversy surrounding the UC in Japan

Why were the UC-LDP ties considered scandalous upon their revelation? The UC's controversial background combined with the context of Japan's post-war Constitution, provide an explanation.

The UC is a religious organization founded in South Korea by Moon Sun Myung and made its way to Japan in the mid-1960s. Before the scandal, the UC was mostly known to the Japanese public for its mass weddings, which were significantly covered by the media.

However, following the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe, a more sinister aspect of the Church surfaced. Significant allegations included mind control and aggressive fund-raising strategies. They sold religious merchandise, such as decorative objects or jewelry at inflated prices, promising divine blessings or healing. These goods were typically marketed to vulnerable organization members, including the elderly.

It was also claimed that the UC brainwashed and coerced its members to donate large sums of money to prove their devotion. Moreover, the Japanese UC

members were purported to bear “ancestral sin,” referring to Japan’s past annexation of Korea. To atone for the sin of the ancestors, they were allegedly encouraged to surrender a significant portion of their savings (Yamaguchi, 2022).

Even the UC’s infamous mass weddings carry an underlying nefarious story. An extensive study done by Sakurai (2010) tracked down how these practices are riddled with deception and particularly damaging to UC’s female members, many of whom are Japanese. These brides, often treated poorly, were instructed under UC dogma to endure the mistreatment and obey their husband unconditionally. For women married under UC practices, marriage is seen more as a spiritual activity than a romantic union (Hyun Mee, 2016).

Relevant to this research is the UC’s engagement in political life. Since the late 1960s, the UC has ventured into Japan’s political arena by cooperating mainly with conservative politicians, offering political patronage in exchange for assistance with the UC’s operations (McGill, 2022; Sakurai, 2010).

In Japan, the intersection of religion and politics tends to draw public criticism, a phenomenon rooted in the country’s historical developments and the institutional framework established after the Second World War.

The separation of the state and religion is made clear under the Japanese Constitution 1947, prohibiting religious organizations from exerting political influence. The mandate is articulated in Chapter III, Article 20:

“Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor

exercise any political authority. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, rite or practice. The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity”.

Indeed, in a nation that increasingly becoming more secular, combining politics and religion is guaranteed to elicit criticism, particularly from the younger generation (Reader, 2012). Preceding the LDP-UC case, the LDP was heavily criticized for forming a relationship with Nippon Kaigi, a right-wing organization. Similarly, *Komeito*, a political party that initially established based on a Buddhist teaching, was forced to resign from Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist organization, due to public pressure (Gentry, 2021).

It is important to note that as of the time of writing, it was not clear what kind of influence, if any, that UC may have on Japanese politics. Prime Minister Kishida has repeatedly reassured the public that the UC does not intervene nor influence policies (Sripala, 2022). Nonetheless, a campaign donation from a religious organization to the lawmakers raises public concern.

3.2 The Emergence of Scandal

The assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Nara in late 2022 was a seismic event in Japanese politics. The shooter claimed to have a grudge, not against Abe personally, but against the UC, which he sees as closely tied to the LDP, Abe’s political party. The shooter alleged that the exorbitant amount of donation contributed by the victim’s mother led to his family bankruptcy.

Following the event, several former members and victims of the UC began to speak publicly and shared the abuse and harassment that they suffered under the organization (Fukuda, 2023). The victims' testimony against the UC gained public sympathy. The Kishida government was increasingly under a public pressure to create an avenue to help the victims. In late July, various newspapers published a list of Japanese lawmakers who accepted campaign donations from the UC. The former head of the UC further admitted this relationship in mid-2022.

Most of the politicians reported to have ties with the UC are from Kishida's party, the LDP, which has been a ruling party in Japan since 1955. This revelation was another blow for the government, which already suffers from a drop in approval rating. In September 2022, the approval rating dropped to 40 %, the lowest since Kishida assumed premiership (French & Imahashi, 2022).

The UC has built a close relationship with the major Japanese political party since the late 1950s. Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who was the Japanese prime minister in 1970, was involved in the UC's success in building a headquarters in Japan. At the beginning, the LDP and the UC were bonded over shared values, such as conservatism and anti-communism. However, in recent years, it has evolved into a relationship based on mutual interest.

For many LDP politicians, the collaboration was driven by electoral agenda, rather than shared principle. They relied on UC support to run the campaign, as many politicians lack of manpower to handle tedious tasks during the campaign. While the number of the UC devotees is too

small to constitute a significant voting bloc, they provide much-needed volunteers to help with the campaign. The volunteers were tasked with running tedious tasks, such as calling the individual constituencies or delivering campaign leaflets.

A well-run campaign could make a major difference in the result of the election. Among those who accepted UC volunteers was Abe's brother, Nobuo Kishi (Takahashi, 2022). In exchange, the politicians attended various events organized by the UC, lending credibility to the church's activity in Japan.

3.3 The Corrective Measures

After weeks of public pressure and intense media coverage, the scandal has reached its final stage. This section explores the government's response to the masses by introducing political and legislative measures to mitigate the damage caused by the scandal.

3.4.1 Political Measure

Political measure refers to how the government responds to minimize the political damage caused by the revelation of the scandal. Initially, Prime Minister Kishida attempted to distance his political party from the UC. When more of his members were revealed to be linked to the UC, he was forced to address the matter and pledged to launch an investigation. However, with half of the LDP members revealed to either accept a campaign donation or show some kind of support for the Church, the government sought out a different measure in an attempt to restore public trust.

The government attempts to conduct damage control largely through two strategies: severing ties with the UC

and a cabinet reshuffle. The Kishida government was under mounting pressure as soon as the news of the ties broke. The Prime Minister swiftly addressed the matter publicly in July 2022, only a few days after various media outlets broke the news.

In the following weeks, the government promised to address the growing concern and investigate the matter thoroughly. Nonetheless, critics argue that the government lukewarm response was not enough to reassure the public. In August 2022, Prime Minister Kishida reiterated his demand for his party members to sever ties with the UC, going as far as make it a priority, which shows that the government eventually took the problem seriously (Miyake, 2022).

In September 2022, the approval rating dipped from around 60% to 40%, prompting Prime Minister Kishida to take drastic measures (French & Imahashi, 2022). He reshuffled his cabinet and removed seven members with UC ties. Another round of 'clean up' was made two months after the reshuffle as several members with acknowledged ties to the UC, including the economic minister Daishiro Yamagiwa, resigned after facing growing public pressure.

As one Japanese observer put it, the cabinet reshuffle served as a damage control, a common occurrence in the progression of Japan's political scandals. By cutting ties with several of his members, it gives the appearance that the government is doing something. Moreover, the Prime Minister also shows his attempt to pin the responsibility on the hands of individuals while continuing to distance his government from the scandal.

3.4.2 Legislative Measure

Since the victims of the UC spoke up publicly, the government faced pressure to prevent such financial damage. In the months following the emergence of scandal, the LDP, along with its junior coalition party, Komeito, worked with the oppositions, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), and Nippon Ishin, to outlaw an exploitative donation. The collaboration between the ruling and the opposition parties accelerated the progress of the bill. In early December, the LDP and the opposition parties agreed to vote the bill in the Lower House.

Eventually, on December 10, 2022, the Japanese Parliament passed the Act on the Prevention of Malicious Donation Solicitations by Organizations, also known as the anti-malicious donation act (Table 1). The act is arguably the most important piece of legislation related to the scandal. It aimed to protect victims from so-called spiritual sales exploitation.

For example, under this new law, donations are subject to restrictions. The law prohibits organizations from accepting donations more than ten percent of the victim's annual salary.

Another important component of the law is that it provides a legal pathway for victims' families to cancel donations or purchases. This avenue was created as many victims who made purchases or donations were brainwashed or under some kind of coercion, thus unable to make informed decisions.

While the Act has been criticized for its lack of clarity, it is welcomed by the victims and their families. Indeed, Prime Minister Kishida, in one of his public speeches, desc the act is as the commitment

of the government to protect the public from predatory spiritual sales.

Insight/Japan-builds-case-to-dissolve-scandal-hit-Unification-Church

Table 1 Timeline of the Scandal

Dates	Events
July 2022	The Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated in Nara during a campaign The motive of the suspected murderer is confirmed.
August 2022	Media reported the list of LDP members that have relationship with the UC. Various media reported the experience of the UC victims. PM Kishida reshuffled his cabinet, in attempt to distant his government from the UC and gain public trust. Prime Minister Kishida addressed the public concern by ordering an investigation on the UC activities in Japan.
October 2022	Daishiro Yanagiwa, the economic minister resigned over mounting public pressure due to his ties to the UC.
November 2022	The government initiated a bill to protect the public from aggressive fund raising, the so-called spiritual sales.
December 2022	LDP, with its junior coalition partner Komeito worked with the opposition parties, CDP to craft the anti-malicious donation bill. The Parliament passed the anti-malicious donation law

Note. Adapted from “Japan build case to dissolve scandal-hit Unification Church,” A. French and R. Imahashi, 2022, *Nikkei Asia*. Retrieved from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia->

4. Conclusion

The primary argument of this paper is that the scandal serves as a form of communication between the government and the people, mediated by the media. To understand this form of communication, this paper traces the progression of the scandal through three phases: the background, the explosion, and the aftermath.

During the progression of the scandal, this paper found that communications between the public and the government manifested in the form of public criticism and political as well as the legislative responses by the government, all intensely covered by the media. Public pressure was mirrored in the declining government approval ratings since the emergence of the scandal, as well as in various surveys conducted by newspapers.

The government responded in two ways: politically, by assuring the public through televised speeches and apologies, and through the purge of lawmakers engaged in the scandal; legislatively, by passing the anti-malicious donation statute by the end of 2022. The government’s decision to pass the anti-malicious donation bill without any resistance from the opposition party demonstrates their urgency to respond to the public outcry. While the effectiveness of the law in curbing malicious donation is yet to be seen, the law provides security measures for the public against exploitative organization.

This paper departs from the primary narratives in understanding the impact of

Japanese political scandals, which tend to focus on the negative impacts. It investigates under what conditions a political scandal may produce a positive outcome for society, using the case of the ties between LDP lawmakers and a controversial religious organization, the UC.

The relationship between politics and religion, as shown in the case of the LDP-UC, is considered scandalous for two reasons: (1) the Constitution mandates the separation of Church and State, and (2) the nature of the UC itself, which is considered a problematic organization.

By understanding a scandal as a form of political communication between the elite and the masses, mediated by media, this paper traces the *modus operandi* of a scandal from the beginning to the end.

Arguably, the anti-malicious donation law is a single important piece of legislation to protect the public. Thus, it shows that while a scandal exposes the disorder and flaws in the system, it may also signal progress that otherwise cannot be achieved. Drawing from this perspective, this paper offers an alternative reading of how and under what circumstances a political scandal may have a positive impact.

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