

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan's Blatant Violations Of Religious Freedom

Knut Holdhus
July 3, 2024



Photo taken 10th August 2022 at the Prime Minister's official residence in conjunction with the inauguration of the second Kishida reshuffled cabinet. Photo: 内閣官房内閣広報室 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)
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Tokyo paper sheds light on Kishida administration's gross violations of religious freedom of minority faith

Tokyo, 1st July 2024 - Published as first article in a series in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - The Kishida Administration's Reckless Actions

Swallowing Reports Whole from National Network of Lawyers and the Media, Abandoning Fairness in Cabinet Reshuffle

by the Freedom of Religion Reporting Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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It has been two years since former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated while on the campaign trail 8th July 2022. The incident triggered increased criticism and attacks on the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), which the suspect, Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也) was said to have harboured resentment against. In response, the administration of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has proceeded with a request to dissolve the [religious organization](#). With the legal basis still uncertain, the targeting of a specific religious organization has placed the freedom of religion, a cornerstone of Japan's post-war prosperity, in grave danger.

Kishida stated in August 2022,

"As far as I know, I personally have no connection with the said organization. [...] To dispel public doubts, during this Cabinet reshuffle, I instructed ministers to inspect their relationships with the [organization](#) in question, take responsibility as politicians, and to make strict revisions based on the results. Only those who understood and agreed to this were appointed."



Prime Minister Fumio Kishida violating religious freedom. Here, 16th April 2023

On 10th August 2022, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced that a review of relations with the [Family Federation](#) would be a condition for appointments during the Cabinet reshuffle. The Prime Minister stated, "We must exercise utmost caution to ensure that there are no doubts among the public regarding relationships with organizations that have been pointed out as socially problematic."

He explained that this measure was taken because the [Family Federation](#) has been identified as a "socially problematic organization."

The decision not to appoint lawmakers with ties to the [Family Federation](#) to the Cabinet amounts to the Prime Minister, as the head of the administration, excluding a specific religion. This is a significant measure that infringes on the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution. Moreover, the justification for this action - "being pointed out as socially problematic" - is exceedingly vague, as it relies on the judgment of others.

A month had passed since former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was fatally shot. Prime Minister Kishida, who is also the president of the Liberal Democratic Party, had achieved a landslide victory in the House of Councillors election held on 10th July 2022. Opinion polls conducted through mid-July showed high approval ratings for the Cabinet. However, after the incident [the assassination], the media extensively reported about the connections between the [Family Federation](#) and the Liberal Democratic Party, and the situation has gradually begun to look uncertain.

On the night of the incident, Nara Prefectural Police officials leaked that the motive behind former Prime Minister Abe's shooting was the perpetrator's "grudge" against the [Family Federation](#), which his mother had joined. The media eagerly seized on this information. It led to an intensified coverage of the [Family Federation](#).



Masaki Kito in 2022

As the media frenzy grew, lawyer Masaki Kito of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (a group that has opposed the [Family Federation](#) since its establishment in 1987) appeared frequently on TV programs and participated actively in hearings by political parties such as the Constitutional Democratic Party and the Communist Party, driving critical media coverage.

For 35 years, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (全国弁連 - Zenkoku Benren) had exclusively handled lawsuits related to so-called spiritual sales, as well as lawsuits involving former and current members of the [Family Federation](#) and their families or relatives against the organization. Consequently, they had almost complete control over information related to lawsuits involving the [Family](#)

[Federation](#).

The National Network made claims such as "The total damages from spiritual sales over the past 35 years amount to 123.7 billion yen." Another claim made by Masaki Kito was, "This is only a part of the damage, and if it is assumed to be one-tenth of the total, the damages would exceed 1 trillion yen." Such claims were arbitrarily amplified by the media.

It was in this context that the second Kishida Cabinet [second reshuffle, September 2023] was formed. However, once it was inaugurated, the "ties" between the appointed ministers and the [Family Federation](#) began to surface one after another. This left the Prime Minister scrambling to explain and address the situation. Prime Minister Kishida's greatest mistake was failing to verify the truth of "socially pointed out" issues as a government. Instead, he uncritically accepted the claims of a certain lawyer group hostile to the [Family Federation](#) and the reports based on those claims. Panicked by the decline in approval ratings, he abandoned the fairness and impartiality that should be upheld by the head of the executive branch of government.

Moreover, this situation has an ironic twist. It was revealed by an Asahi Shimbun report on 4th December

2023, that Prime Minister Kishida's statement at a press conference, claiming "I personally have no connection" with the [Family Federation](#), was completely untrue.



Met with Fumio Kishida in 2019: Newt Gingrich, here speaking at the Republican National Convention 20th July 2016

In October 2019, when Prime Minister Kishida was the Chairman of the Policy Research Council of the Liberal Democratic Party, he held a meeting at the party headquarters with Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives. During this meeting, he also met and exchanged business cards with leaders of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) of Japan, an organization with ties to the [Family Federation](#). When questioned about this, the Prime Minister responded by acting as if he had forgotten about it entirely, saying, "I am not aware of it."

The exclusion of lawmakers from the Cabinet who do not reconsider their relationship with the [Family Federation](#) seems to have been a kind of emergency measure for public opinion management. However, Prime Minister Kishida's opportunistic populist approach, hidden in his heart, not only undermines the quality of politics but also shakes the foundation of Japanese society, including basic human rights, freedom of religion, and equality under the law.

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Cutting Of Ties Is How Christians Were Treated

July 4, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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Pointed out by Tokyo Paper: The Kishida administration's cutting of ties with minority faith evokes painful memories of horrible persecution of Christians

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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat – The Kishida Administration's Reckless Actions Violating Freedom through 'Cutting of Ties'

by the Freedom of Religion Reporting Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

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On 31st August 2022, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who had returned to



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official duties after being infected with the new coronavirus, held a press conference at the *Prime Minister's Office* and declared, in his capacity as President of the *Liberal Democratic Party*, a severance of ties with the [Family Federation](#).



Toshimitsu Motegi in May 2023. Photo: U.S. Department of State / Wikimedia Commons. Public domain image. Cropped

The Prime Minister announced that he had instructed Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi to ensure that party members 'sincerely reflect on the past and **sever ties** with the [organization](#), making this the party's fundamental policy.'

At that time, did Prime Minister Kishida truly understand the serious implications of a political party that champions freedom and democracy declaring that it would sever ties with a specific [religious organization](#)? In democratic Japan, **politicians are free to have a relationship to religious organizations**. The exception is when the organization is an anti-social force, in which case having contact itself is problematic. However, in the case of the [Family Federation](#), Kishida's declaration of cutting of ties was based on the vague reasoning

that it is a "socially problematic organization".

The *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (Zenkoku Benren)* and the *Communist Party (JCP)* have long asserted that the [Family Federation](#) is an anti-social organization and that for a member of the Diet to have a relationship with it gives the [organization](#) "legitimacy" and serves as "advertising". Prime Minister Kishida has completely aligned himself with this view.

In 1987, on 10th July, during a session in the *Japanese National Diet*, a *Communist Party* senator asked Prime Minister at the time Yasuhiro Nakasone (中曽根康弘) about the *Federation for Victory over Communism* (勝共連合), an organization associated with the [Family Federation](#) (then known as "[Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christians](#)" = the [Unification Church](#)), which was causing controversy due to the "spiritual sales" issue. The senator inquired, "As Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, will you clearly state that you will sever ties with the *Federation for Victory Over Communism*?" Nakasone responded as follows,



Yasuhiro Nakasone (1918-2019), Japanese Prime Minister 1982-1987. Photo: 首相官邸ホームページ / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 4.0 Int

"Regarding what the Liberal Democratic Party says about severing ties with certain organizations, I consider it a **serious violation of freedom of thought and action**. [...] I think this is a **manifestation of the Communist Party's dictatorial policy**."

Nakasone understood that declaring, as the party's president, the severance of ties with a particular organization would be a **serious violation of the "freedom of thought and action"** of the organization and individual *Liberal Democratic Party* members.

In accordance with Prime Minister Kishida's instructions, Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi (茂木敏充) sent an eight-item questionnaire titled "*Regarding Relationships with the Former [Unification Church](#) and Related Organizations*" to all 379 affiliated Diet members [in both houses] and requested their response. The content included actions that are not problematic for politicians, such as "attending meetings hosted by the Former [Unification Church](#)" and "receiving volunteer support during elections".

The *Liberal Democratic Party* has started to **scrutinize even actions like "sending congratulatory telegrams or messages to meetings", akin to the religious persecution of Christians** during the era of religious inquisitions.

On 8th September 2022, the *Liberal Democratic Party* announced the results of its investigation and declared a policy to thoroughly incorporate into its governance code the severance of ties with the [religious organization](#). This method is **exactly the same as the "self-criticism" and "obedience to party discipline" demanded by the mainstream faction of the Communist Party** when forcing the non-mainstream factions to submit during a policy shift.

As a national political party, the *Liberal Democratic Party* (LDP) has been backed by members and supporters from a wide variety of religious and ideological backgrounds. The diversity of those backgrounds has been one of the sources of the party's vigour. **Indiscriminately excluding a single religious organization is tantamount to a suicidal act** for a party

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that advocates freedom and democracy.

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Featured image above: This print shows Fumi-e (踏み絵 fumi “stepping-on” + e “picture”); step on a picture with the likeness of e.g. the Cross of Jesus or the Virgin Mary. This method was used to discover practicing Christians (Kirishitan) of the Catholic Church and sympathizers, which was banned by the Tokugawa Shogunate at that time. Originally, the method of discovery itself was called efumi (絵踏), but the method itself is often called fumi-e.

People who protested or were reluctant to step upon pictures of the Virgin Mary or Christ were identified as Christian. They were taken to Nagasaki and ordered to renounce their religion, if they refused they were tortured. If they kept refusing then they were executed including by burning at the stake. The systematic persecution began in 1614 and carried out by regional governments. By the mid 17th century, the Shogunate demanded the expulsion of all European missionaries and the execution of all converts. The prosecution lasted for over 2 centuries. (Wikimedia Commons) Photo: Unknown author. **Public domain** image. Cropped

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