

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Fierce Persecution of Japan's Unificationists

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The panel during session 8 at the 2024 CESNUR conference in Bordeaux, France



In report from international conference on minority religions, Tokyo paper sums up key issues at stake in situation with horrendous persecution in Japan

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Calls to make the Japanese dissolution request an international issue

Family Federation and others concerned about the situation in Japan at a religious symposium in Bordeaux, France

by the Religious and Political Reporting Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

The 2024 CESNUR Conference, an international symposium on minority religions was held in Bordeaux, western France. The focus was on the issue in Japan where the religious corporation the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) faces a dissolution order.



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, April 2023

The media created a sensation by criticizing the [religious organisation](#) following the shocking gun attack on former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe two years ago. That led the government to plan the dissolution of the [religious corporation](#), an act which severely restricts the religious freedom of all members of the [organisation](#), who have nothing to do with the incident. The symposium raised awareness that "the Japanese government's attack on the [Family Federation](#) represents a serious crisis for religious freedom in the democratic world."

The symposium, co-hosted by the [Center for Studies on New Religions](#) (CESNUR), Université Bordeaux Montaigne - CLIMAS (Cultures and literature of the Anglophone World), and [International Society for the Study of New Religions](#) (ISSNR), is being held from the 12th to the 15th June 2024. The theme is ""[The Contribution of Minority Religions to Society](#)". Discussions were being held in 23 sessions on the social situations of minority religions around the world.

On 13th June, the 8th session titled "The Unification Church and Japan: What Is Exactly Happening?" addressed the issue surrounding the [Family Federation](#) in Japan, with the B200 lecture hall at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne nearly full.

Researchers showed interest in the circumstances surrounding the government in "no time at all" using its majority power to request the dissolution of a [religious corporation](#) for reasons other than violation of the criminal law. This is the first time this has happened in Japan under its postwar constitution, a country

where democracy has taken root, and which has become an advanced nation. This development could potentially affect many other minority religions and their followers. The session was moderated by British sociologist of religion Eileen Barker.

As an introduction, co-founder of CESNUR and Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne gave an overview of the circumstances leading to the government's request for a dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#). His presentation was titled "The Post-Abe Assassination Crisis: An Outline". He discussed the incident caused by Tetsuya Yamagami, the defendant who harboured resentment against the [religious organisation](#) due to his mother's large donations as a believer.

Introvigne stated that after the incident, "a parade began of defectors who had become apostates." They criticized the [religious organisation](#) in the media. The Italian scholar indicated that the statements of those defectors are one-sided and sometimes not factual. He also expressed concern about the situation surrounding minority religions in Japan, mentioning abusive criticism against the Jehovah's Witnesses. Introvigne stated, "The way forward is to internationalize the issue and bring it to international conferences. I believe what we are doing today contributes to that."



Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama in Jan. 2024

During the session, there was time to hear voices from officials from the [religious organisation](#). They expressed concerns about the threat to religious freedom posed by the request for a dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#) in Japan. Testimonies were given by Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama; Deputy Director of the Legal Affairs Bureau of the [Family Federation](#)'s Japan Headquarters Norishige Kondo; and Suzuko Hirschmann, who lives in Vienna and whose older sister was forced to de-convert through abduction and confinement.

Tatsuki Nakayama spoke on the topic "Why the [Family Federation](#) in Japan Should Not Be Dissolved." He said that the conditions for dissolution under Article 81 of the Religious Corporations Act stipulate that an act must be "clearly" recognized as violating the law and "significantly" harming the public welfare, and that this should be interpreted strictly. He argued that the [Family Federation](#) does not meet these criteria and noted that past prime ministers, governments, and courts have said no to dissolving the [organisation](#). He mentioned that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida overnight changed his parliamentary response, stating that "torts under civil law" could qualify as grounds for dissolution.

Nakayama furthermore emphasized that

- 1) The [Family Federation](#) has been recognized as a religious corporation for 60 years as of July and has not been involved in any crime during this time.
- 2) They lost some civil lawsuits for the return of donation, but
- 3) behind those lawsuits are apostates who have been forcibly de-converted.

Norishige Kondo reported that after the Abe incident, media reports criticizing the [organisation](#) escalated, resulting in threats and harassment against [organisation](#) facilities and believers. He also criticized Prime Minister Kishida's declaration on August 31, 2022, to sever ties with the [Family Federation](#), stating,

"Since most [Family Federation](#) believers work in general companies, if Liberal Democratic Party members follow Kishida's instructions, they would have to investigate the beliefs of everyone they contact, and if they are identified as [Family Federation](#) believers, sever ties, which is unconstitutional."

In addition, Kondo addressed the civil lawsuits regarding donations, pointing out that

- 1) there is no research in Japan indicating that the testimonies of apostates are unreliable;
- 2) there is no custom in Japan of making large donations to religions;
- 3) since Japanese people, including legal professionals, generally do not believe in [God](#), judges think that no one would make large donations unless threatened with stories of suffering in hell; and
- 4) judges in Japan fear being criticized by the media for helping a "cult".



Norishige Kondo speaking in Tokyo 10th Sep. 2023

The dissolution of the [religious corporation](#) means that all believers lose their place to worship and engage in religious activities. The fact that a session was devoted to this issue at an international conference overseas shows the growing interest. During the question-and-answer session, many questions were asked from the audience about the so-called second-generation religious issue, abduction and confinement, and other topics.

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January 22, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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Japanese government in collusion with group hostile to Family Federation

Third of six parts of Seiron report – More on [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 4](#), [part 5](#), [part 6](#)

The Japanese monthly opinion magazine Seiron (正論) published in its December 2023 issue a feature article on the **outrageous**



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persecution of the [Family Federation](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) in Japan.

One part of the report by Makiko Takita, well known journalist and editor-in-chief of the magazine, is an interview with Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion and editor-in-chief of [Bitter Winter](#), the leading international online magazine on religious freedom and human rights.



The cover front page of *Monthly Seiron* December 2023.

BITTER WINTER [Bitter Winter](#) published this part of the report of *Seiron* on 19th January 2024, as the **third of six parts** of the English version of the original Japanese article. Read the [whole Bitter Winter article](#). Read more on [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 4](#), [article 5](#), [article 6](#).

In the interview with Dr. Introvigne, he says he is concerned about the legal actions taken against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), formerly the [Unification Church](#), in Japan.

The sociologist of religion, famous globally for his work, expresses his worry about the Japanese government's request for a dissolution order against the [Unification Church](#), citing that the organization has not committed any crimes in Japan, a democratic country that guarantees freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). He emphasizes that, in his experience working globally to defend freedom of religion or belief, this is the **first time he has seen such a request for dissolution in a democratic country**.

"[...] and it is a great shock to me," the scholar says, expressing his concern about what he perceives as an **unusual and concerning legal action** against the [Unification Church](#) in Japan.

Introvigne draws comparisons with other countries, mentioning that even in countries where there is criticism of the [Unification Church](#), such as the United States and Italy, there is no government action to legally regulate or dissolve the organization. He also contrasts the situation with Russia and China, where religious organizations, including the [Unification Church](#), face persecution and dissolution by the government. However, he notes that China and Russia are not democratic regimes, and the criteria for what constitutes a crime differ from those in Japan.



Front page of 2018 English version of *Religious Corporations Act of Japan*.

Massimo Introvigne further discusses the situation in Japan where the government is pursuing the dissolution of the [Unification Church](#) under the *Religious Corporations Act*. He compares this to the dissolution of an organization called *Artgemeinschaft* in Germany in September 2023.

Introvigne points out that even in democracies, systems for dissolving organizations exist, but their application is typically limited to cases where a crime, punishable under the penal code, has been committed. He provides an example of the dissolution of *Artgemeinschaft* in Germany, which he describes as a political organization rooted in Nazism rather than a religious movement. The dissolution of *Artgemeinschaft* was requested based on criminal activities, aligning with the general principle that **dissolutions in democracies are tied to criminal conduct**.

Introvigne emphasizes that the situation in Japan, where the government is seeking to dissolve the [Unification Church](#) without it having committed any criminal acts, is unique and

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unusual in a democratic country that upholds freedom of religion. He points out that the current events in Japan are being highlighted in Chinese and Russian media as a form of propaganda, drawing parallels between Japan's actions and those of China in suppressing religious groups. Introvigne explains how the **situation in Japan is being used for propaganda purposes by China and Russia,**



Persecution in China: Tibetan Monks arrested in 2008. Photo (5th April 2008): SFT HQ (Students for a Free Tibet) / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 2.0 Gen. Cropped

"I am the editor-in-chief of a daily web magazine called '[Bitter Winter](#),' which covers news about religious freedom violations around the world. I carefully watch the Chinese media, and every week an article about the dissolution of the [Unification Church](#) in Japan always catches my eye. The articles are full of claims that 'Japan is doing the same thing as China' 'We have been proven right,' 'Cults should be suppressed,' and so on. Similar arguments can be read in the Russian government-affiliated media, and the **current events in Japan are being used for propaganda purposes by China and Russia.** We would do well to keep this in mind."

The Seiron report provides an overview of events surrounding the [Unification Church](#) in Japan, particularly in the aftermath of the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by an individual with a grudge against the [Unification Church](#). Introvigne expresses concerns about the way the government and certain groups have been handling the situation. Certain **important facts about the assassin seem to have been ignored completely by the media.** The general public appears to have been given a **slanted picture of the situation.** The Italian scholar points out,

"I noted that **the man [the assassin] had been interacting with journalists and other opponents of the [Unification Church](#) on social media before the incident.** Obviously, I do not believe that they encouraged him to kill Abe, but I wonder if they might have **excited his hostility** to punish the [Unification Church](#). Why did the man commit such a heinous act? I do not believe that this has been fully clarified."

And straightaway after the assassination on 8th July 2022, the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* (全国霊感商法対策弁護士連絡会), a group of largely leftwing activist lawyers who have been fierce opponents of the [Unification Church](#) for decades, called a press conference where they **blamed the church** for what had happened.

Dr. Introvigne describes the tactic of the network of lawyers as a **"reversal phenomenon". The perceived victim becomes the perpetrator, and the alleged perpetrator is treated as a victim.**



Kingdom Hall in Hamburg-Alsterdorf, ten days after the killing spree on 9th March 2023: damaged door, flowers

The scholar mentions similar cases in South Korea and Germany where so-called anti-cult movements attempted to **shift blame** onto religious organizations,

and candles. Photo: NordNordWest / Wikimedia Commons. Licence: CC BY-SA 3.0 Germany

“Last March [2023] in Germany, a former member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses broke into a place of worship of this religion, called Kingdom Hall, and killed eight people with a gun. Then, some members of the anti-cult movement, which opposes Jehovah’s Witnesses, came forward and criticized the religion, saying that the cause of the incident was that ‘the Jehovah’s Witnesses have continued to abuse this man,’ and called for the religious organization to bear the brunt of the blame. The anti-cult movement deflected the blame from the mistakes of the authorities [who had given a license to carry weapons to a mentally disturbed man] and tried to create a campaign against the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Introvigne **criticizes the Japanese government for joining forces with the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales** (全国霊感商法対策弁護士連絡会) in various procedures related to a dissolution order against the **Unification Church**. He argues that such collaboration between the government and a so-called anti-cult movement is ideologically and politically strange.

The scholar says,

“Only in Japan has the **government totally jumped on the bandwagon**. In Korea and Germany, the media reports on the voices of anti-cult movements, and this can cause a lot of commotion. Sometimes there are campaigns to condemn these groups as ‘cults.’ However, there is no example of a democratic government reacting to such a campaign and moving toward the dissolution of the organization.”

Dr. Massimo Introvigne **denounces the Japanese government for all of a sudden changing its policy** and allowing cases of tortious conduct to be sufficient ground for dissolving a religious organization. He explains,

“If religious corporations can be dissolved for torts under civil law, there is **no such thing as a safe organization**. This shows that this **was not a legal decision, but a political decision**. What the Japanese government has done is a **clear violation of the principle of religious freedom**. It is a move that should be strongly condemned.”

Introvigne contends that the Japanese



*Blatant discrimination: “Colored” drinking fountain from mid-20th century with African-American drinking from water cooler in streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA. Photo (1939): Russell Lee (1903-1986) / Wikimedia Commons. **Public domain** image*

government’s decision to pursue the dissolution of the **Unification Church** is a violation of the principle of religious freedom. He expresses concern that this move **may have a ripple effect and set a precedent for private entities to discriminate** against the **Unification Church**,

“and start saying, ‘We will have nothing to do with

them.' This is undeniable **religious discrimination**, which is unacceptable in light of international law, which stipulates that there shall be no discrimination based on ideology, creed, religion, or other such grounds."

Introvigne **questions the legitimacy of the government's decision**, stating that it appears to be a political decision rather than a legal one.

In fact, there have already been **instances of discriminatory incidents** in Japan, such as local governments refusing to rent public facilities to independent organizations connected with the [Family Federation](#) or passing resolutions to sever relations with such organizations in local government councils.

And what makes matters worse in Japan, is the fact that there might be **collusion between the Japanese government and the courts**. For more on that particular issue, see [Does Japan Have an Independent Judiciary?](#)

More on [part 2 of the interview](#) (part 4 of the Seiron report).

More on [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 4](#), [article 5](#), [article 6](#) in the Seiron report.

Featured image above: Dr. Massimo Introvigne in April 2023. Photo: [FOREF](#)

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