

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Dr. Michael Mickler - Will PM Kishida's stepping down bring Religious Freedom to Japan?

Knut Holdhus
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On August 14, 2024, Prime Minister Kishida held a press conference regarding his decision not to run for the Liberal Democratic Party presidential election



Dr. Michael Mickler

Dissolution of the Kishida Administration: A Boon for Religious Freedom in Japan?

Under Kishida, Japan went through the worst religious liberty crisis in its recent history. Will his successor improve the situation?

by Dr. Michael Mickler

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's administration championed the dissolution of the [Family Federation / Unification Church](#) (UC) in Japan, but the initial result has been its own dissolution. At a press briefing on August 14, Kishida announced that he would step down as leader of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in September. But whether his resignation will halt actions that have had a chilling effect on religious freedom in Japan is an open question.

Outrage against the [Family Federation](#), and repressive measures against unpopular religious groups generally, escalated following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022. The assassin told investigators that he shot Abe in retaliation for Abe's support of the [Unification Church](#) and that he held a grudge against the [church](#) over his mother's donations more than twenty years previously.



Prime Minister Kishida, August 14, 2024

Japanese media subsequently exposed ties between the [Unification Church](#) and the LDP.

The Kishida administration reacted with vengeance. On August 31, 2022, the LDP stated it would no longer have any relationship with the [Unification Church](#) and its associated organizations. On October 16, Kishida announced that the government would open an investigation into the [Family Federation](#) and three days later reversed legal precedent by stating that civil complaints rather than criminal violations could serve as a basis of dissolution. On October 13, 2023, the Kishida administration petitioned the Tokyo District Court to issue an order to

dissolve the [Family Federation](#).

The Kishida administration did not only target the [Family Federation](#). Related legislation carried a more general anti-religious animus. In December 2022, the Japanese Diet passed a Prevention of Unfair Solicitation of Donations by Corporations Act, which granted broad recovery rights to those claiming to be victims of "mind control" as well as to relatives and others objecting to donations on grounds of mind control.

The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare then issued new guidelines on "the religious abuse of children". Drafted in consultation with the Japanese Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (JSCPR), the guidelines had the immediate effect of generating a climate of discrimination and hate against the Jehovah's Witnesses who reported a 638% increase in hate crimes in 2023 as compared to the previous six years.



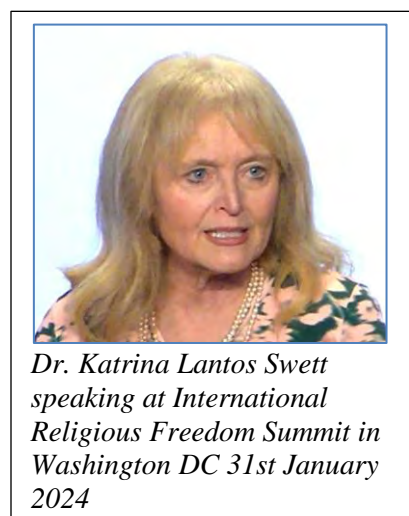
This came to the attention of [four UN Special Rapporteurs](#) who sent an official letter to the government of Japan expressing concern over the "stigmatization of some religious or belief minorities," a situation they described as "warranting immediate action."



Still, concerns expressed by the international human rights community did not prompt Kishida's resignation. Japanese were mostly dissatisfied with his handling of financial scandals within the LDP. Essentially, he adopted a cancel-culture approach, removing cabinet ministers and dissolving party factions rather than engaging underlying problems. This paralleled his approach to "societally problematic" groups such as the [Family Federation](#) and Jehovah's Witnesses. In the end, he cancelled himself.

The question remains whether Kishida's resignation will improve the situation. This will to some extent depend upon his successor. However, negative "cult" stereotypes and systemic barriers to religious freedom in Japan should not be underestimated.

Japan religion expert Levi McLaughlin points out a distinction in Japanese culture between "good religion" embedded in Japanese "culture, custom, spirituality, tradition, or another safe tradition" and "aberrant sects, misleading superstitions, nefarious cults, and other heterodoxies." These minority groups account for what he describes as Japan's "unease with religion" and trigger periodic "moral panics."



Conformist tendencies that characterize Japan's judiciary and media accentuate social prejudices. Critics of the Japanese court system have highlighted its restraint toward actions of the executive and legislative branches of government, its lack of transparency (Japan does not utilize juries, and proceedings are private), and a presumption of guilt culture in which [government prosecutors win 99.9% of criminal cases](#) and 98% of appeals. This has implications for the [Family Federation](#) dissolution case brought by the Kishida administration.

Japan has the lowest ranking among G-7 nations on media freedom. Restrictive, government-approved "Kisha kurabu," or press clubs are a major reason for this. Once the government distances itself from an unpopular group, or labels it a social evil, reporters limit themselves to one-sided, negative stories. "Near universal censorship"

Katrina Lantos Swett, former Chair of the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom, has used the [metaphor of "drunk drivers"](#) to describe democratic countries that pursue misguided crusades against marginal religions. It's questionable whether Kishida's resignation signals a new day for religious freedom in Japan. It does signify that Japan will have a new, hopefully soberer designated driver.

The article has [also been published by Bitter Winter](#) on 27th August 2024.

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Kyodo News: 100s Of Rights Violations Claimed

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Large Japanese news agency reports on hundreds of rights violations suffered by minority faith

by Knut Holdhus



After *Kyodo News*, the leading news agency of Japan, issued its report on 23rd June 2024, dozens of Japanese newspapers, including large ones like the *Sankei Shimbun* and *Tokyo Shimbun*, have reported on hundreds of human rights violations and other damages suffered by members of the [Family Federation](#), formerly the [Unification Church](#) throughout Japan.

According to the [Kyodo News](#) report, the [Family Federation](#) had received a number of inquiries from various news outlets, and in response to those, it released a

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statement on 22nd June claiming that since 8th July 2022, there had been "a total of 337 cases of human rights violations and other damages had been reported by believers and churches nationwide up to December of last year". 8th July 2022 is the day former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was killed by assassin Tetsuya Yamagami, who claimed grudges against the [Family Federation](#).



Graffiti sprayed on [Family Federation](#) facilities in Japan after the Abe assassination in July 2022. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

The huge number of open hostilities against the [Family Federation](#) include graffiti sprayed on cars, and windows of church facilities being broken during prayer sessions.

According to the large news agency, the [Family Federation](#) also alleged that contracts to purchase cars under the church's name were signed at used car

dealerships affiliated with Toyota and Nissan, but the purchases were later refused. Toyota denied these claims, stating, "There is no truth to it," while Nissan commented, "We do not disclose individual transactions and have not issued any directives regarding sales to the church."

The [Family Federation](#) announced that it will present these details in writing to [Tokyo District Court](#) during the hearings for the dissolution order requested by the Kishida administration. The religious organization also reported recurring incidents of graffiti with messages like "Traitor cult" and "Cult, get out," along with nuisance phone calls at churches in various locations across the nation.



Graffiti sprayed on [Family Federation](#) facilities in Japan after the Abe assassination in July 2022. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Kyodo News also reported that conflicts within families belonging to the [Family Federation](#) regarding faith and donations have intensified. For example, a woman in her 70s from the Tokyo metropolitan area sustained a fracture after being assaulted by her husband, who acquired negative views of the [religious organization](#) following the assassination of the popular former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In another case, a woman in her 60s from the same region reported that her relationship with her daughter rapidly deteriorated after the media linked the cold-blooded murder of Abe to the [Family Federation](#). It culminated in the daughter's suicide in July 2022, soon after the assassination.

The statement issued by the [Family Federation](#) on 22nd June gives a detailed overview of the human rights violations and other damages suffered by the [religious organization](#) and its members since the huge number of sensationalist biased media articles that turned truth on its head, claiming it was the [Family Federation](#) that was the perpetrator and the assassin a victim.

Featured image above: [Shidome Media Tower](#), located in [Shiodome](#), [Minato](#), [Tokyo](#), [Japan](#). Floors 1-24 are the headquarters of [Kyodo News](#), [Japan's largest news agency](#). Photo: ↷ License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp](#).

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