

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan Refuses UN Religious Freedom Visit

Knut Holdhus
December 14, 2024



Japan ignoring formal request for a UN visit to investigate the country's abusive treatment of religious minorities



On 25th November 2024, [Bitter Winter](#) the leading online magazine on religious freedom and human rights, published an article penned by Dr. Massimo Introvigne titled "[Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses: Why Is Japan Not Accepting a UN Visit?](#)"

Introvigne writes,

"Something very strange is happening with Japan. After United Nations criticism of its attitude towards the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities, it seems that the Japanese government is trying to prevent an official visit to the country by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea."



The official request for a visit to Japan by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief as published on the UN website

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, formally requested to visit Japan on 28th March 2024. However, Japan has not accepted the request, which raises questions given its democratic status and history of extending standing invitations to UN Special Rapporteurs.

This hesitation is particularly notable in light of recent international criticism of Japan's treatment of religious minorities, especially the Jehovah's Witnesses and the [Unification Church](#) (now known as the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)).

Japan's reluctance is viewed as a diplomatic tactic akin to "fin de non recevoir", where governments indefinitely delay responses to avoid explicit refusals. Such strategies are often employed by authoritarian regimes rather than democratic nations. For example, China initially resisted UN visits to Xinjiang but eventually allowed one, albeit under international pressure, revealing the reputational costs of prolonged resistance. Japan's stance risks drawing even greater international criticism, potentially tarnishing its image.

The Special Rapporteur's insistence on visiting Japan stems from concerns raised in a joint letter on 30th April 2024, co-signed by three other UN Rapporteurs. This letter criticized Japan's measures against the [Family Federation](#) and Jehovah's Witnesses following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. His assassin reportedly targeted him due to his association with the [Family Federation](#), which led to heightened scrutiny of the group.



*UN Special Rapporteur:
Clément Nyaletsossi Voule*



*UN Special Rapporteur: Irene
Khan 2024*



*UN Special Rapporteur: Farida
Shaheed 2016*

The Japanese government has since implemented regulations that the UN officials argue may violate principles of neutrality and non-discrimination, while also stigmatizing religious minorities. Critics have pointed out that so-called "anti-cult" activists, known for their hostility toward these groups, were involved in drafting the regulations.



Patricia Duval, French attorney and expert on international human rights law. She has defended the rights of minorities of religion in domestic and international fora, and before institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Union, and the United Nations. She has also published numerous scholarly articles on freedom of religion or belief

Japan has also pursued legal action to dissolve the [Family Federation](#), a move that experts like French attorney Patricia Duval argue [violates international human rights commitments](#). Dissolution would deprive the [organization](#) of its assets and effectively end its operations.

Meanwhile, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the [Family Federation](#) members have faced ongoing discrimination and even physical violence. Critics argue that Japan's actions have largely relied on testimonies from disaffected former members, ignoring positive accounts and the organizations' social contributions, such as disaster relief efforts.

The potential UN visit would likely spotlight these issues and examine alleged abuses, including the exclusion of positive testimonies and reports of arbitrary actions by Japanese authorities abroad, such as those [targeting a Senegalese school](#) connected to the [Family Federation](#). The visit amplifies existing criticism from NGOs and international scholars while pushing Japan to reconsider its policies.

Japan's refusal to accept the visit is seen as counterproductive, as it draws more attention to its actions and [aligns its behavior](#) with that of countries notorious for human rights violations. Observers argue that allowing the visit would be less damaging than the ongoing refusal, which casts doubt on Japan's commitment to religious freedom and its international obligations.

The situation underscores broader concerns about Japan's approach to religious minorities. Critics worry that the government's actions reflect not only a reaction to Abe's assassination but also deeper

issues of intolerance. They urge Japan to permit the visit to demonstrate transparency and uphold its democratic values. Failure to do so risks [aligning the country with regimes](#) that suppress religious freedom, undermining its global standing.

[Editor's note: Dr. Massimo Introvigne is a prominent Italian sociologist and scholar of religion, known for his extensive research and writings on new religious movements, religious freedom, and minority religions. He is known for his balanced and nuanced perspective, striving to present the views of both critics and adherents of various religious movements while emphasizing the importance of upholding human rights and freedom of belief.]

Introvigne is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an internationally recognized organization based in Turin, Italy, that focuses on the study of minority religions and new religious movements.

He has authored and co-authored numerous books and articles on religious movements and the sociology of religion. His work often explores controversial or misunderstood groups, including Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the [Unification Church](#).

He is also the editor-in-chief of [Bitter Winter](#), an online magazine focusing on religious freedom and human rights issues, particularly in countries like China and Japan.

Introvigne is highly regarded in academic circles for his objective and well-researched approach to studying controversial religions. He often challenges mainstream narratives and highlights the sociological and legal dimensions of religious freedom.]

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Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses: Why Is Japan Not Accepting a UN Visit?

11/25/2024 MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

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The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief formally requested on March 28, 2024, to visit Japan. Astonishingly, her request has not been accepted.

by Massimo Introvigne



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The official request for a visit to Japan by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief as published on the UN website.

Something very strange is happening with Japan. After United Nations criticism of its attitude towards the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities, it seems that the Japanese government is trying to prevent an official visit to the country by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea.

On March 28, 2024, the Special Rapporteur officially requested to conduct a country visit to Japan. Her request is officially posted on the United Nations' website (see screenshot above).

Yet, the visit has not been scheduled, which means that Japan did not agree to it. Japan is a democratic country and one that extended a standing invitation to Special Rapporteurs in 2011, yet in practice each visit should be confirmed to actually happen. This has not been the case for the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief's March 2024 request.

If I may, I would add that I am familiar with the procedure as I was in 2011 the Representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions. OSCE Representatives' system of country visits was patterned after the one used by the UN Special Rapporteurs. I expressed my intention to visit certain countries (including, for the first time in OSCE history, the Vatican, which accepted) but needed their ad hoc invitation to actually go there.

Both OSCE and UN Representatives and Rapporteurs normally are unable to visit totalitarian and non-democratic countries. Almost nobody refuses the visits explicitly. The strategy used by those who have something to hide is what is called in diplomatic language "fin de non recevoir." They simply delay the answer indefinitely.



Sometimes, however, even totalitarian states understand that they should allow such visits to save face. "Bitter Winter" covered the saga of the cat and mouse game between China and then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet about a visit to Xinjiang, which she requested in June 2018. After considerable international pressure, the visit happened in 2022. China used COVID as an excuse in 2020 and 2021, but there was no COVID lockdown in 2018 and 2019.

After the visits, Rapporteurs normally publish reports. After Bachelet's visit to Xinjiang, China started lobbying against the publication of her report. She only released it on August 31, 2022, on the eve of the end of her term as High Commissioner. China managed to avoid the use of the word "genocide," but was still unhappy that the report mentioned its "crimes against humanity."

This recent precedent is very important. It shows that even China, while continuing to play its usual games, in the end realized that not allowing a high UN Human rights representative to visit the country was worse in terms of international reputation than having to confront a negative report.

Why is Japan putting itself in an even worse international position than China? The reason of course is that Ghanea co-signed on April 30, 2024, with Special Rapporteur on the right to education Farida Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression Irene Khan, and Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, a letter to Japan that mightily disturbed the local government. The Japanese government did submit a very weak response to the statement only on June 27.

The Rapporteurs' letter clearly denounced that after the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by a man who claimed he wanted to punish him for his cooperation with the Unification Church, which the assassin hated, the Japanese government adopted a series of measures targeting both the Unification Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses (and potentially other religious groups). The Rapporteurs found that some measures "may constitute a violation of the principles of neutrality and non-discrimination, as well as potentially contributing to further stigmatization and suspicion of religious or belief minorities." They also noted with concern that anti-cultists well-known for their vitriolic criticism of the targeted groups had cooperated with the government in drafting regulations.

In the meantime, the Japanese government is pursuing at the District Court of Tokyo a legal action seeking the dissolution of the Unification Church, now called Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. In Japan, a legal dissolution is a death sentence as it deprives the dissolved religious corporation of its assets and makes the continuation of its regular activities impossible in practice. Well-known specialized French attorney Patricia Duval has demonstrated that the action violates the international commitments of Japan under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Meanwhile, discrimination and even physical violence has continued against the Jehovah's Witnesses as well as against devotees of the Unification Church.



Members of the Unification Church/Family Federation protesting against the violation of their rights in Yamaguchi, July 2024.

This is, as they say, hidden in plain sight in Japan. A visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief would underline that what is happening is not acceptable and add emphasis to a blame already expressed by many NGOs and international scholars. During the visit, it may also come out that Japanese authorities only interviewed disgruntled second-generation ex-members of the Unification Church while ignoring the thousands that reported positive experiences in the religious organization. They also ignored the positive social contributions of the reportedly "anti-social" church and its allied organizations, including through disaster relief after earthquakes and tsunamis. The visit may even examine the arbitrary actions of the Japanese authorities abroad, including against a school in Senegal funded by an organization connected with the Unification Church.

Japan can, of course, continue to refuse the visit. As somebody who admires so many features of Japan's culture and rich religious heritage, I would, however, respectfully suggest to the Japanese authorities that continuing to prevent the visit from happening is worse for Japan's reputation than anything Ghanea could say while visiting the country or in her report. It puts Japan dangerously close to egregious violators of human rights and freedom of religion or belief—which can run but cannot hide.

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Massimo Introvigne

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions ([CESNUR](#)), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#) and of the executive board of University of California Press' [Nova Religio](#). From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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