

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan covers up Persecution of Religion by refusing UN Investigation

Knut Holdhus
December 20, 2024



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, 6th April 2023

Japanese government continues to prevent an official visit as it doesn't respond to request for UN investigation into the country's treatment of religious minorities

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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 7: Religion in Japan in a Global Context

Japanese Government Rejects UN Investigation

Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion

introduction by the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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UN Special Rapporteur: Nazila Ghanea (2023)

The Japanese government has refused the request for a visit from Nazila Ghanea, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, to investigate potential violations of religious freedom affecting minority religions such as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly the Unification Church) and Jehovah's Witnesses.

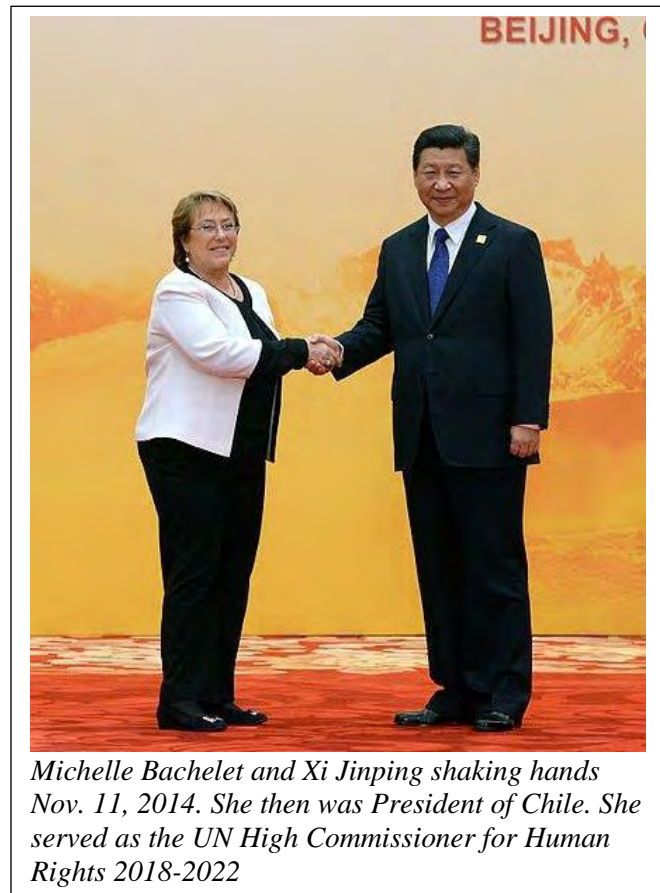
This article republishes a [paper by Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne](#) addressing the issue.

by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist and scholar of religion

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.



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.



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

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.



International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

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](#).

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 Ghana 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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Japan Misreading Separation Of Church And State

December 19, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



Misunderstanding the separation of church and state in Japan: Protecting religious freedom vs. excluding religion from politics

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Driving a little over two hours southwest from Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States, takes you to Charlottesville, a lush university town in central Virginia. Located on the outskirts of this city is Monticello, the home of the third U.S. President, Thomas Jefferson. Designated as a *UNESCO World Heritage Site*, Monticello attracts numerous visitors from both within the United States and abroad.

The estate boasts beautiful gardens, and within one section lies Jefferson's grave. Despite leaving an unparalleled legacy as one of the most prominent "Founding Fathers", only three of Jefferson's accomplishments – those he was most proud of – are inscribed on his tombstone.

The first is drafting the *Declaration of Independence*, the second is drafting the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, and the third



Statue of Thomas Jefferson in Monticello, Virginia, USA. Photo: Linkfuss / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp](#)

is founding the *University of Virginia*. Interestingly, Jefferson took greater pride in contributing to the establishment of laws protecting religious freedom than in having served as President of the United States.

For many years in the United States, a "culture war" has been ongoing between conservative groups seeking to preserve Christian traditions and values, and liberal groups attempting to replace these with leftist ideologies. Liberals have sought to remove Christian elements from society through court battles and other means, citing the principle of "separation of church and state".

A central piece of evidence in the debate over the separation of church and state is a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1802 to the *Danbury Baptist Association* in Connecticut. In it, Jefferson mentioned having built "a wall of separation between church and state". This phrase has led to the modern perception of Jefferson as a strict advocate of the separation



Thomas Jefferson's tombstone in the Jefferson Graveyard at Monticello, Virginia on an autumn evening Nov. 2011. Photo: Jacob

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of church and state.

Interestingly, Jefferson used the phrase "wall of separation" only once, in this private letter. Despite this, it has been treated almost as if it were law, frequently cited in court decisions as a foundational principle of church-state separation.

However, a closer reading of the letter reveals that Jefferson did not intend for the "wall of separation" to mean the exclusion of religion from public life. The Baptists to whom he wrote were a religious minority facing persecution in states like Virginia, where the Anglican Church dominated. Jefferson's use of the phrase was meant to fully support their religious freedom. In other words, the true purpose of the "wall of separation" was to protect religious minorities from state interference.

Unlike George Washington, the devoutly Christian first president, Jefferson is often considered the most secular among the Founding Fathers. A deist, he believed in a [God](#) who created natural laws but was not a personal being. Jefferson dismissed the virgin birth, miracles, and resurrection of Jesus as fabrications, yet he admired Jesus' teachings, not as the work of a savior but as a model of moral conduct.



Portrait of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), painting from 1805 by Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860). Photo: New York Historical Society / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#)

During his eight-year presidency beginning in 1801, Thomas Jefferson was a dedicated attendee of Sunday worship services held in the U.S. House of Representatives, a public institution. Remarkably, his first attendance at such a service occurred just two days after he penned the "wall of separation" letter. Jefferson is also reported to have said,

"No nation has ever existed or been governed without religion, nor can it be governed without it. As the president of this country, I must set an example and demonstrate my support."

The history of the United States' founding reveals that the principle of the separation of church and state was established to protect religious freedom from government interference. However, in Japan, the debate surrounding the principle of separation often focuses on the notion that religion should not be involved in politics.

This misinterpretation of the principle of separation of church and state likely underpins much of the criticism directed at attempts by organizations affiliated with the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) to influence politics. It is clear that such criticism often stems from a misunderstanding of the concept.

Featured image above: Separation of church and state. Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 19th December 2024.

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