

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Religious Liberty Crisis in Japan Raises Global Alarm

Knut Holdhus
December 31, 2024



Participants in an event organized by the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF) Japan Committee at Niterra Civic Hall in Nagoya, on December 9, 2024

International leaders in world of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) issued a joint statement raising global alarm over crisis for religious liberty in Japan

BITTER WINTER On 31st December 2024, a significant assembly of global leaders in freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) issued a joint statement addressing the escalating "religious liberty crisis in Japan." The statement was published by [Bitter Winter](#), the leading online magazine on human rights and religious freedom, headlined "[The Global Religious Liberty Community Gathers to Denounce Religious Liberty Crisis in Japan](#)".



Sent formal UN request to Japan, but no reply: Nazila Ghanea, UN Rapporteur on Religious Freedom since February 2023. Here, visiting Oslo 22nd August 2023

The statement highlighted concerns following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, noting how certain groups exploited the tragedy to target conservative religions and stigmatized minorities labeled as "cults". Initially focused on the [Unification Church](#) (now [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, FFWPU](#)), the campaign has since extended to Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups.

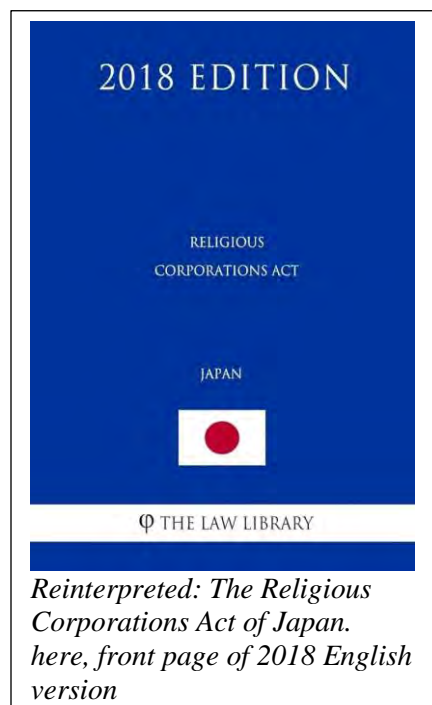
Newly enacted laws restrict religious minorities' rights to solicit donations and transmit beliefs to their children, drawing criticism from the United Nations. A statement by four UN Special Rapporteurs and a pending visit request from FoRB Rapporteur Nazila Ghanea underscore growing international alarm. However, Japan has yet to respond to these concerns.

The signatories condemned the reinterpretation of Japan's Religious Corporations Act, which traditionally allowed dissolution of religious organizations only for serious criminal conduct. Authorities now cite civil cases over donations as grounds for attempting to dissolve the [Family Federation](#), despite no criminal

offenses.

This crisis represents an unprecedented attack on FoRB within a democratic nation. However, the response of academics, human rights advocates, and religious leaders joining forces in solidarity offers hope. The coalition urged Japanese religious leaders to unite in defense of FoRB, warning that the implications of this crisis extend far beyond Japan.

The statement itself, co-signed by 31 leaders in the world of freedom of religion, had the title "Human



The statement mentions how the assassination of Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022, shocked the world, leaving millions mourning a tragic loss. However, the aftermath of this crime has raised deep concerns among scholars, human rights activists, and faith representatives regarding threats to religious freedom in Japan.

Abe's assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, claimed his actions were motivated by Abe's ties to organizations affiliated with the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), formerly the [Unification Church](#). Yamagami's animosity stemmed from his mother's financial troubles after making substantial donations to the movement that is now called the [Family Federation](#), though these donations were partially refunded through a mutual settlement in 2009. Notably, Yamagami himself was never a member of the [movement](#) and had acknowledged the settlement. Despite this, the assassination spurred renewed hostility towards the [Family Federation](#) and other religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

This hostility invoked the populist but unscientific label of "cult" and focused on alleged practices such as high-pressure donation solicitations and insufficient education for second-generation members. Critics revived claims about "spiritual sales" from decades past, though such sales had mostly ceased. Media and political narratives amplified the grievances of individuals reporting negative experiences while ignoring the many second-generation members who thrived within these faiths.



Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan

Post-Assassination Legal Measures

The Abe assassination prompted three significant legal and administrative measures:

- 1. Reinterpretation of Dissolution Laws:** The legal grounds for dissolving religious corporations were redefined retroactively. Previously, dissolution required evidence of major crimes; now, losing civil cases may suffice. This precedent risks targeting any religious organization with civil litigation, creating a chilling effect on religious freedom.
- 2. Restrictions on Donations:** New provisions limit how "controversial" organizations can solicit donations and allow donors, their heirs, or relatives to reclaim contributions more easily. This introduces broad suspicion around religious fundraising and donations.
- 3. Guidelines on Religious Practices:** The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare issued guidelines targeting alleged "religious abuse of children". These include practices common in conservative religious groups, such as forbidding birthday celebrations (typical of Jehovah's Witnesses), discussing sex-related sins in confession (as in Catholicism), and teaching views on Hell or abortion (common in Evangelical traditions). These vague provisions stigmatize religious teachings and practices fundamental to many faiths.

Threats to Religious Freedom



International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

The implications of these measures extend beyond the [Family Federation](#) to threaten all religious groups. Labels such as "controversial" or "anti-social" lack clear definitions, enabling opponents to target minority religions arbitrarily. Concerns about donations often rely on discredited theories of "brainwashing" and "mental manipulation", dismissed by Western scholars for decades. The new guidelines risk curbing the ability of conservative religions to socialize children with values differing from societal norms.

International Attention and Calls for Accountability

In response to these developments, prominent UN Special Rapporteurs, including Dr. Nazila Ghanea, have raised concerns. They issued a UN Mandate to Japan on 1st April 2024, questioning potential violations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly regarding

parental rights to guide children's upbringing. The mandate highlighted how the Ministry's guidelines, developed in consultation with the Japanese Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (JSCPR), stigmatized minority religions. Despite a 60-day window for response, Japan failed to reply, prompting the mandate's public release on 1st July 2024.

Dr. Ghanea's request to visit Japan to investigate these issues remains unanswered. Meanwhile, hate crimes and hate speech against Jehovah's Witnesses and other minorities have reportedly increased since the guidelines' publication.



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

Attorney Patricia Duval, a respected French human rights specialist, also filed a report in September 2024 documenting decades-long religious discrimination in Japan. Her findings provide critical context for the UN's concerns and underline the systemic nature of these challenges.

Upholding Religious Freedom and Human Rights

Japan, as a democratic nation committed to due process, must honor its international obligations and constitutional protections of religious freedom. Legal actions influenced by emotional responses to Abe's assassination should not undermine the rights of religious organizations to operate freely, collect donations, and pass their beliefs to future generations.

A Call to Action

Faith leaders in Japan must stand united in defending religious liberty. The nation's adherence to the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and its own Constitution's guarantees of religious freedom is crucial. As history warns us, threats to one group's freedom often presage broader erosions of rights.

German Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemöller's words remain a stark reminder: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out [...] Then they came for me - and there was no one left to speak for me."

The actions Japan takes now will resonate far beyond its borders, shaping global perceptions of its commitment to human rights and

democratic values.



Dr. Martin Niemöller 27th May 1952

Impact Statement signatories:

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Luigi Berzano, Professor at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Torino, Italy

Sam Brownback, Co-chair of the International Religious Freedom Summit

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The Global Religious Liberty Community Gathers to Denounce Religious Liberty Crisis in Japan

12/31/2024 BITTER WINTER

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As the year comes to an end, leaders from the academic, human rights, and religious activism's world come together to express concern for what is happening in the Asian country.

By Bitter Winter



Participants in an event organized by the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF) Japan Committee at Niterra Civic Hall in Nagoya, on December 9, 2024, where the director-in-charge of "Bitter Winter," Marco Respinti, delivered a lecture.

[Press release] On December 31, 2024, an impressive number of global leaders in the field of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) signed a statement on the "religious liberty crisis in Japan." They noted that after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, forces hostile to FoRB and to religious minorities used the incident to crack down on conservative religion and on groups some stigmatize as "cults." Although the Unification Church (now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, FFWPU) was initially targeted, the campaign extended to the Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups.

New laws and regulations were passed limiting the right of religious minorities to solicit donations and transmit their faith to their children, raising objections by the United Nations, expressed in a statement by four UN Special Rapporteurs. The December 31 document also notes with concern that the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Nazila Ghanea, "has requested an opportunity to visit Japan to examine the reports her office received on this potential violation. However, she has not received an answer to her request."

The Japanese Law on Religious Corporations, the signatories note, which allows for dissolution of religious organizations that committed serious crimes, has been re-interpreted in a novel way to allow the government to file a case for dissolving the Unification Church/FFWPU, which has committed no crimes, based on the fact that it lost some civil (as opposite to criminal) cases concerning donations. This case is at the center of the most serious religious liberty crisis in a democratic country in a world today, the signatories said.

Two facts marked the year 2024 from the perspective of freedom of religion or belief, one negative and one positive, the signatories stated. The first is the unprecedented assault against FoRB in a country whose democratic institutions are generally respected and admired, Japan. The second is the coming together of a large coalition of academics, human rights activists, and religious leaders expressing their collective concern for the situation of FoRB and the crisis in Japan. This coalition is a sign of hope. It now calls on Japanese religious leaders to join its fight.

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Human Rights and Religious Freedom Impact Statement

A Religious Liberty Crisis in Japan

The July 8, 2022, assassination of Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shocked the world. Millions of people mourned this tragic loss and terrible crime. However, we, the undersigned scholars and human rights activists, who are concerned for freedom of religion or belief, and representatives of multiple faiths, have been further concerned to see how various forces are using this assassination to begin dismantling key human rights of religious believers in the democratic nation of Japan.

Prime Minister Abe was assassinated by a man called Tetsuya Yamagami. He claimed to want to punish Abe for his cooperation with organizations affiliated with the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, formerly known as the Unification Church. The assassin purportedly hated the Family Federation because his mother, a member, had declared bankruptcy in 2002 due, in part, to her generous donations to her religion. Less mentioned in the media is the fact that half of Mrs. Yamagami's donations were returned to her in 2009 as part of a mutually agreed upon settlement. Also, Mr. Tetsuya Yamagami, her son, the assassin, was never a member of the religious movement and in fact signed a statement accepting the settlement mentioned above.

As a result of the Abe assassination, there was a sudden resurgence of old and largely politically motivated campaigns against the Unification Church. These efforts, relying on the populist but unscientific term "cult" also targeted other groups, including religions such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. The campaign focused on the alleged pressures exerted by "cults" on their members to donate, and on the alleged deficient education of second-generation members of these movements. "Spiritual sales," a disparaging term coined by opponents of the Unification Church in the 1980s, was frequently mentioned. The controversy referred to the sale of items such as miniature pagodas, seals, and other artifacts presented as bringing spiritual fortune; such sales were carried out by a company whose members were part of the Unification Church. By the time of the Abe assassination, these sales had largely ceased, and complaints were reduced to a handful, although cases of so-called "spiritual sales" still reached the courts even though they took place many years and even several decades earlier. As for the claim that second-generation members were not provided with good educational opportunities, only those who reported negative experiences were heard by the media and the politicians, ignoring the thousands who grew up happily in new religious movements and gladly remained there.

Three kinds of legal measures were introduced after the Abe assassination. First, the legal provisions about dissolution of a religious corporation were reinterpreted (and the new interpretation was applied retroactively). Before the Abe assassination, the law was interpreted to the effect that only religious corporations found guilty of major crimes could be dissolved. Now, to seek dissolution of the Family Federation, the government has reversed the previous interpretation and claims that having lost some civil cases is enough to be dissolved. If this minimalist basis for dissolution is upheld by the courts, then no religion will be safe from dissolution.

Second, new provisions were introduced limiting the possibility for "controversial" organizations to solicit donations and making it easier for those who had donated to such movements or their heirs and relatives to get their money back.

Third, guidelines in the form of Questions and Answers were published about the so-called deprivation of second-generation members of "controversial" religious movements and the so-called "religious abuse of children." Several provisions of the guidelines have nothing to do with the Unification Church and target the Jehovah's Witnesses and other conservative Christian groups. For example, it is regarded as abusive to prevent minors from celebrating birthdays (a practice typical of the Jehovah's Witnesses), to admit minors to confession if during the confessional dialogue sex-related sins will be discussed (which normally happens in the Roman Catholic Church), or teaching minors about Hell or that abortion is not admitted in any circumstance (usual teachings in conservative Evangelical Christian denominations).

We express our concern for measures that threaten all religions, not the Family Federation alone, and not new religious movements alone. Many religious organizations may become involved in civil litigation, and if losing some civil cases is enough for dissolution, then nobody is safe. There is no definition of "controversial" or "anti-social" organizations. These labels are used against all religions by their opponents, and frequently against minority groups that are legitimate components of larger traditions such as Christianity or Buddhism. A general suspicion has been introduced against donations to religious bodies, based on discredited theories of "brainwashing" or "mental manipulation", theories that scholars of religion in the West have debunked for more than forty years. The vague provisions on "religious abuse of children" target socialization of children in all conservative religions teaching minors values that are different from those shared by the majority.

We believe that the strong emotions generated by the Abe assassination, understandable though they may be, should not lead to legislation, administrative, or legal actions that violate human rights in Japan. A democracy should not arbitrarily harm the right of any religion to operate freely, collect donations, and transmit its faith and moral values to the next generation.

In a recent development concerning religious freedom issues in Japan, Dr. Nazila Ghanea, professor at Oxford University and United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as Farida Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, issued a [UN Mandate](#) asking for explanations on questions about what appear to be violations of the ICCPR in relation to parents' rights in guiding their children. The Mandate was sent directly to Japan on April 1, 2024, with a 60-day period for response. After the 60-day period expired without any such response being received, the Mandate was then made public on July 1, 2024.

The Special Rapporteurs state, "On 27 December 2022, the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare released a "Q&A on

Responses to Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs, etc.”. The Q&A Guidelines were developed against the background of increased scrutiny and stigmatization of some religious or belief minorities following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 8 July 2022, as some religious groups’ activities were cited as possible motive for the murder. The Guidelines were drafted in consultation with the Japanese Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (JSCPR), whose chairperson called for the recognition of a new type of child abuse by religious groups in October 2022 and had previously made public statements denigrating the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious or belief minorities.”

Dr. Ghanea has requested an opportunity to visit Japan to examine the reports her office received on this potential violation. However, she has not received an answer to her request.

It is important for Japan, a democratic country committed to due process, to abide by International Law and to honor requests for transparency on issues of freedom of religion, belief and fundamental human rights. In this case, however, it is clear that the Special Rapporteur’s request was made in connection to the publication of the above mentioned “Q&A on Responses to Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs, etc.” and that this publication led to a reported subsequent increase in hate crimes and hate speech against Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious or belief minorities.

In addition, in September 2024 Attorney Patricia Duval from France, who is a respected human rights specialist, filed a [report on Japan](#) with the office of the Rapporteurs. She highlights a decades-long pattern of religious discrimination against one minority religion, a pattern which constitutes an important but largely unnoticed backdrop to the issues raised in the UN Mandate.

We write to you, faith leaders in Japan, to encourage you to protect religious freedom and call upon the great nation of Japan to continue to uphold the covenants it currently has with the United Nations International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights and the Human Rights Declaration as well as the Constitution of Japan, which affirms religious freedom for all faiths.

This is a time when we should soberly ask “who will be next?” And everyone should remember the famous words of German Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemöller, who, when confronted with the tragedy of Nazism stated: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

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