

**FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Forced Renunciation of Faith Condemned**

Knut Holdhus  
July 19, 2025



*Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa discussing issues with the dissolution order request issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) - July 12, 2025, Sapporo City, Japan*



**Religious leaders condemn forced renunciation of faith at interfaith forum as Christian leader criticizes the process against the Family Federation for being heavily biased and one-sided**

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**Religious Leaders Condemn Forced Renunciation of Faith**

**Interfaith Harmony Forum Held in Sapporo**

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

The "Hokkaido Citizens' Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom", a group of volunteers affiliated with the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), recently held the 3rd Interfaith and Scholars Forum in Sapporo. Around 200 people participated.

At the forum, Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa (中川晴久) of the Christian Church of the Lord's Sheep (主の羊クリスチャン教会) delivered the keynote address. He criticized the request from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to the Tokyo District Court for the dissolution of the [Family Federation](#). Nakagawa criticized the process for being heavily biased in one direction. He stated that the root of the issue lies in the fact that some Christian pastors have targeted [Family Federation](#) believers and subjected them to forcible faith-breaking (de-conversion, renunciation of faith) [See editor's note below] involving [abduction and confinement](#). He emphasized,

"The number of pastors involved in abductions, based on what I personally know, easily exceeds 200 and is close to 300."

He appealed that,

"The government's acceptance of only the opposition's perspective amounts to an abuse of state power."

In the second part of the forum, a panel discussion was held featuring Reverend Kōshin Enomoto (榎本興信), a monk from the Jodo Shinshu Takada sect, and Imam Mohammad Ismael of the Hokkaido Islamic Society. Reverend Enomoto firmly stated that "forcible faith-breaking [See editor's note below], even when committed by one's own family members, through violence to change someone's faith must never be tolerated." He added,



*Protesting against the evil of deprogramming (faith-breaking) in Shinjuku, Tokyo December 8, 2024. Here, Toru Goto (後藤 徹), representing the [National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Religious De-Conversion](#) (center), delivering a speech. The posters behind him carry pictures of Toru Goto hardly able to walk after more than 12 years of forcible confinement*

"If Jesus Christ, the Buddha, and Muhammad were here, they would shake hands with one another and say, 'Don't go to war!'"

Enomoto called for interfaith harmony as the path to peace.

**[Editor's note:** Coercive faith-breaking ("deprogramming", forced renunciation of faith) in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the [Family Federation](#) or Jehovah's Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.



*Also subject to faith-breaking attempts: Members of Soka Gakkai. Here, students belonging to the faith in 2001*

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]

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# UN Report: Japan's Lawfare Against Faith Minority

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• Knut Holdhus

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Legal expert warns of religious freedom crisis in Japan as UN report alleges legal pretext and vague laws are used to dismantle Family Federation

Text: Knut Holdhus


Patricia Duval, a leading expert in legal matters at the intersection of religion, belief, and state regulation, submitted on 30<sup>th</sup> June a **shocking report to Special Rapporteurs** [\[See editor's note below\]](#)

of the *United Nations*. She rings the alarm bells as she describes the current dissolution case against the [Family Federation](#) in Japan as a **coordinated campaign to eliminate a religious organization** through legal and political




Nazila Ghanea, one of the UN Special Rapporteurs [\[See editor's](#)


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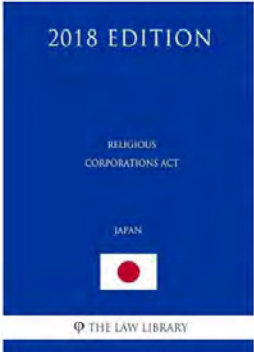
organization through legal and political means. Duval points out **serious violations of judicial independence and due process**.

**Bitter Winter**, the daily, multilingual leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights, posted from 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> July a series of four articles on Patricia Duval report to the UN, and on 15<sup>th</sup> July an **executive summary**.

Patricia Duval's report to the United Nations is significant for several key reasons. It frames the Japanese government's actions against the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (formerly the **Unification Church**) in Japan **not just as a domestic legal issue**, but as a **serious international human rights concern** – particularly one that involves the erosion of religious liberty, due process, and judicial independence.

reporters [see center note below] who received the alarming report from Patricia Duval. Ghanea has already sent formal UN request to Japan, but has so far received no reply: Nazila Ghanea, UN Rapporteur on Religious Freedom since February 2023. Photo: GiovannaKa / Wikimedia Commons. License: **CC ASA 4.0 Int**

**Freedom of Religion Undermined by Legal Manipulation**



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

Duval argues that the dissolution of the **Family Federation** is being enabled through a reinterpretation of Japan's *Religious Corporations Act*, effectively weaponizing a law that was not originally intended to dissolve religious organizations based on alleged civil wrongdoings (torts taken to court in civil lawsuits). The shift from requiring *criminal* wrongdoing to allowing *civil* disputes (like claims from former members) as a basis for dissolution is a dramatic change in legal practice. It risks setting a precedent whereby unpopular or politically targeted religions could be dismantled based on vague and non-criminal accusations.

**Use of Vague Legal Standards to Justify State Action**

The terms “social appropriateness” and “public welfare”, as used by the courts and state in this case, are criticized in the report as vague and subjective. These standards can allow for arbitrary or discriminatory enforcement – particularly dangerous when applied to religious minorities.

The *UN Human Rights Committee* has already warned Japan about the misuse of these terms to restrict freedom of religion or belief, making this case a repetition of a known problem.



From header of the webpage of the Human Rights Committee, a subpage on the site of the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

**Violation of Due Process and Judicial Independence**

The report accuses the Japanese judiciary of failing to act independently by conforming to political and public pressure:

- Hearings were held behind closed doors, denying the **Family Federation** a public and transparent trial.
- The government began liquidation planning before the appeal was heard, implying that the judiciary's decision was presumed or predetermined.
- A theory of “mind control” was used in court to deny time limits on accusations and invalidate current expressions of belief, painting active members as ongoing victims incapable of independent thought.

This raises serious concerns about whether the judiciary is operating impartially, or if it has been co-opted by a political and media campaign against a large **religious minority**.

**Religious Persecution Framed as “Victim Relief”**



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A demonstration in Ikebukuro, Tokyo on 8th June 2025 against Japan's state persecution against the [Family Federation](#). Photo: [FFWPU](#)

While the government claims to be acting on behalf of victims of coercive fundraising or "spiritual sales," the report suggests that this narrative masks an orchestrated campaign to dismantle a faith community. The draft liquidation guidelines would enable asset seizures even in the absence of current, verifiable claims – raising the specter of state confiscation of religious property without clear legal justification or representation of the accused.

### International Implications: ICCPR Violations

Duval's report appeals to international law, particularly Article 18 (freedom of religion) and Article 14 (right to a fair trial) of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR). By bringing this to UN Special Rapporteurs, it signals that this is not merely a domestic matter, but one where Japan could be held accountable under international human rights frameworks.

### Potential Chilling Effect on Other Religious Groups

The implications of this case extend beyond the [Family Federation](#). If the state is able to successfully:

- Dissolve a religious organization based on vague, retroactively applied legal theories;
- Seize its assets without a finalized verdict;
- And do so under the pretense of protecting the public, then other minority or politically unpopular religious organizations in Japan may also be at risk. The fear of dissolution could cause religious groups to self-censor, limit outreach, or curtail faith-based fundraising activities.

### Conclusion:

From a freedom of religion perspective, Duval's report is a serious alarm bell. It characterizes the actions of the Japanese state not as legitimate regulation of harmful religious conduct, but as a coordinated campaign to eliminate a [religious organization](#) through legal and political means. The use of civil claims, vague legal standards, non-public hearings, and prejudicial state behavior all point to a system that may be failing its constitutional and international obligations.

This report, therefore, seeks to place international pressure on Japan to halt what Duval describes as a judicially enabled dismantling of religious freedom, and to restore due process, judicial neutrality, and equal treatment under the law for all religious groups.

Text: Knut Holdhus

**Featured image** above: Attorney Patricia Duval speaking at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland 16th June 2025. Photo: Screenshot from video recording by UPF.

*[Editor's note: A **Special Rapporteur** (or Independent Expert) is an independent human rights expert appointed by the United Nations (UN) to provide reports or advice on human rights issues from either a thematic or country-specific perspective. These experts are selected by the UN Human Rights Council and operate independently of any government, playing a crucial role in monitoring the actions of sovereign nations and democratically elected governments.*

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