

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Murder of Abe Was Terrorism – Trial Must Be of Terrorist

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Nara District Court (2007)



[Sekai Nippo](#)

Japanese newspaper warns against not calling the murder of Shinzo Abe terrorism, quoting past mistakes of sympathetic narratives about the defendant's personal circumstances

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[Series] **Examining the Trial over the Assassination of Former Prime Minister Abe - part 1**

The Forgotten Essence of the Terrorist Act

Sympathy Echoing the "15th May Incident"

by a special reporting team / the editorial desk of [Sekai Nippo](#)



Positional relationship between former prime minister Shinzo Abe and the shooter Tetsuya Yamagami on his assassination. Sourced from Nikkei.com

In July 2022, in the case in which former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) was assassinated in Nara City, the lay-judge trial of defendant Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也 – 45), who was charged with murder and other offenses, has concluded at the Nara District Court. Over the course of 15 hearings, the trial drew significant public attention. This series highlights the issues revealed by the proceedings.

See also [Yamagami Trial: Peril of Romanticizing Terror](#)

See also [Press Release: Final Submission to Appeal Court](#)

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More than three years and three months after the incident, the trial finally began. From the outset, the facts surrounding Abe's killing were not contested; sentencing was the sole issue. The defense was widely expected to seek leniency by arguing that Yamagami's mother had joined the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), that her large financial donations caused family hardship, and that his disadvantaged upbringing formed the background to the crime.



The immediate aftermath of the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in the vicinity of Kintetsu Yamato-Saidaiji station northern entrance on July 8, 2022

In its closing argument, the prosecution stated that the defendant's upbringing – including his mother's large donations to the former [Unification Church](#) – had "an extremely limited influence on his decision-making regarding the crime." It described the act as "an unprecedented crime in our country's postwar history, in which a former prime minister was killed in full public view," and emphasized that "resorting to violence in order to damage a specific [organization](#) is absolutely unacceptable in a state governed by the rule of law." The prosecution sought a sentence of life imprisonment.

In response, the defense argued that "a perspective recognizing him as a victim of abuse involving religion is indispensable," and insisted that "his upbringing is the most important mitigating factor." The defense maintained that the sentence should be limited to 20 years' imprisonment.

Although only one person – former Prime Minister Abe – was killed, given the grave social impact of the incident and past precedents, many had expected the prosecution to seek the death penalty. Commenting on the decision to seek life imprisonment instead, former prosecutor and attorney Yasuyuki Takai (高井康行) criticized the prosecution, stating:

"There is absolutely no consideration of how the killing of an important political leader in front of the public during an election campaign affected democracy. This calls the prosecution's judgment into question."

He added,

"Considering that the Nagasaki mayor shooting case sought the death penalty, it is only natural that this case should also warrant capital punishment; otherwise, the balance is lost" ([Sekai Nippo](#), 19th December).

 <i>Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion, founder of CESNUR, specializing in new religious movements and religious liberty. A prolific author, he has advised governments and international bodies, and served as OSCE Representative on combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians worldwide and comments on contemporary religious controversies. Here speaking at the UN Office at Geneva on June 16, 2025</i>	 <i>Joker advert on a Malpas Road bus shelter, Newport, Wales, UK</i>	 <i>Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai (1855 - 1932)</i>
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The defendant's crime may not have been "political terrorism" with a clear ideological agenda. However, by killing Shinzo Abe – an influential politician who served the longest tenure as prime minister in constitutional history – the act was clearly intended to shock society and damage a specific [religious organization](#). That is nothing other than terrorism.

Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne has stated, based on Western precedents, that the act was "nothing other than anti-cult terrorism," and has criticized Japanese media for refraining from calling the defendant a terrorist.

Immediately after the incident, many people – including politicians – condemned the attack as a heinous act and a serious challenge to democracy. However, once the spotlight shifted to issues surrounding the former [Unification Church](#), the essential nature of the incident as terrorism was forgotten.

It is evident from online posts that the defendant had a strong interest in the 2019 American film Joker. The film depicts a clown performer who, driven by his misfortune and resentment toward society, goes on a killing spree. The character becomes a kind of dark hero, inspiring others to imitate him and eventually sparking riots.

When the [head](#) of the [religious organization](#) visited Japan to give a lecture in 2019, the defendant attempted to bring Molotov cocktails into the Nagoya venue but was unable to enter and abandoned the plan. The day before, he had watched Joker in a movie theater. On Twitter, he posted about the film at least 15 times, expressing sympathy with the protagonist.

It is possible that the defendant identified himself with the film's main character. This influence may be a crucial factor related to his motive and to the true nature of the crime. However, it does not appear that the police or prosecutors conducted any substantial interrogation on this point.

In April 2023, less than a year after the Abe shooting, then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (岸田文雄) was targeted during an election campaign event in Wakayama Prefecture, where a homemade explosive was thrown at him. Despite the fact that the Abe assassination inspired such copycat crimes, the media continue to avert their eyes from the incident's essential nature as terrorism and instead emphasize sympathetic narratives about the defendant's personal circumstances.

This abnormal phenomenon recalls the trial following the 15th May Incident [See editor's note 1 below]

of 1932, in which young naval officers assassinated Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai (犬養毅). Immediately after the incident, the public sympathized with the prime minister, who had been unjustly killed. However, once the trial began and newspapers started reporting sympathetically on the defendants, public opinion shifted dramatically, and movements emerged calling the act a "righteous deed" and petitioning for leniency.

As a result, the three ringleaders – originally facing the death penalty – had their sentences reduced to 15 years' imprisonment or less. This lenient treatment of terrorists led to a succession of further terrorist acts, culminating in the 26th February Incident [See editor's note 2 below] of 1936 and the eventual collapse of party politics. The trial over the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe – a grave challenge to democracy – must not become a "Reiwa-era [from 2019] 15th May Trial."

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[Editor's note 1: The 15th May Incident refers to the assassination of Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai (犬養毅) on 15th May 1932, by a group of young officers of the Imperial Japanese Navy, acting in concert with civilian ultranationalists. The perpetrators opposed party politics, which they viewed as corrupt and subservient to capitalist and foreign interests, and sought to replace it with direct imperial rule guided by the military.

Inukai was shot and killed at the Prime Minister's residence. According to widely cited accounts, he attempted to reason with his attackers and asked them to "talk it over," but was killed before any discussion could take place.

Initially, public opinion strongly sympathized with the slain prime minister. However, as the trial progressed, newspaper coverage increasingly portrayed the defendants as sincere patriots driven by self-sacrifice rather than as criminals. Thousands of petitions were submitted to the court requesting leniency, some written in blood, praising the defendants' "pure motives."

Although prosecutors sought the death penalty, the court ultimately imposed relatively light sentences: the principal offenders received prison terms of 15 years or less. This outcome significantly weakened civilian authority, legitimized political violence in the public mind, and encouraged the belief that extralegal action could be justified if claimed to serve the nation.



Viscount Korekiyo Takahashi (1854 - 1936), a prominent Japanese statesman who served as Prime Minister from 1921 to 1922 and was Minister of Finance at the time of his assassination. He also held positions as a member of the House of Peers and as head of the Bank of Japan

The 15th May Incident is widely regarded as a critical turning point in the erosion of parliamentary democracy in prewar Japan.]

[Editor's note 2: The 26th February Incident occurred on 26th February 1936, when approximately 1,400 Army troops, led by radical young officers, launched an attempted coup d'état in Tokyo. The rebels assassinated or attempted to assassinate key government and military leaders, including Korekiyo Takahashi (高橋 是清), who was then Finance Minister and had been prime minister, and occupied central government districts.

The insurgents claimed they were acting in loyalty to the Emperor and sought to purge the government of corrupt elites, restore "true" imperial rule, and implement radical reforms. Unlike the May 15 Incident, however, the Emperor firmly rejected the rebels' actions and demanded their immediate suppression.

After several days of tense standoff, the coup collapsed. The leaders were arrested, court-martialed, and many were executed. The incident marked the final failure of overt military rebellion but paradoxically accelerated the consolidation of military dominance over Japanese politics.

Following the 26th February Incident, political parties were

effectively marginalized, civilian leadership was subordinated to the military, and Japan moved rapidly toward authoritarian governance and wartime mobilization. The incident is thus seen as the culmination of a trajectory that began with earlier leniency toward political violence, notably after the 15th May Incident.]

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This distinction is crucial for understanding the contemporary controversy in South Korea, particularly regarding the [Family Federation](#). While politicians' interactions with mainstream religious groups such as Buddhist orders, Catholic institutions, and Protestant churches are widely accepted – even celebrated as symbols of national unity – similar interactions with the [Family Federation](#) are often immediately labeled as “church-state collusion.” The [article](#) challenges this double standard and asks why one religion is treated as inherently suspect while others are granted presumptive legitimacy.

To make this point, the author places the issue in a broader religious and historical context. Founders of major world religions did not reject politics outright. Reporter Jeong writes,

“Jesus acknowledged state authority by saying, ‘Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s,’ while clearly warning against encroachment on the realm of faith. The Buddha emphasized discussion and consensus within the community through the teaching of the Seven Principles of Non-Decline (七不衰法), and Muhammad regarded governance itself as a responsibility entrusted by God.”

In different ways, all recognized that political power directly affects human suffering and well-being and therefore cannot be ignored by religion. What they warned against was not engagement, but subservience – religion becoming a tool of power, or power exploiting religion for selfish ends.

Korea’s modern history reflects this longstanding entanglement. Presidents routinely meet religious leaders, attend worship services during major holidays, and participate in religiously affiliated cultural or charitable events. Jeong includes,

“This Christmas as well, the president visited a Catholic cathedral, while leaders of both ruling and opposition parties attended church services.”

Government funding supports Buddhist temples under cultural preservation laws and Catholic institutions under welfare policy frameworks. These practices are institutionalized, normalized, and rarely questioned. In fact, they are often framed positively – as expressions of inclusivity, heritage, or social cohesion.

The controversy arises when similar practices involve the [Family Federation](#). According to the article, even in cases where no illegal financial transactions have been proven, mere association with the [Federation](#) triggers suspicion. Photographs of meetings, attendance at events, or references to long-standing policy ideas associated with the [Federation](#) are interpreted as evidence of impropriety. Meanwhile, equivalent actions involving other religious groups are dismissed as routine or benign.

The author argues that this discrepancy does not stem from legal reasoning but from what he calls an “asymmetry of trust”. Religions that are deeply embedded in the social and institutional mainstream benefit from historical familiarity. Their political interactions are perceived as natural extensions of tradition. By contrast, religious movements that have been controversial or stigmatized – even if legally recognized – are judged by a harsher moral standard. The same behavior, when performed by different actors, is read entirely differently. This, the [article](#) suggests, reveals not principled secularism, but selective prejudice.

To underscore this point, the author invokes historical examples involving respected political leaders. Former President Kim Dae-jung (김대중), a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and widely admired democratic figure, openly participated in events hosted by organizations affiliated with the [Family Federation](#) in both opposition and presidential roles. He publicly greeted the founders of the [religious organization](#) and expressed favorable views on large-scale infrastructure ideas long promoted by the [movement](#), such as a proposed [undersea tunnel](#) between Korea and Japan. At the time, these actions were framed as discussions about national development and international cooperation, not religious collusion.



Official Portrait of Roh Moo-hyun, the 16th President of the Republic of Korea. Photo (2003): [대한민국 국가기록원](#). License: [Korea Open Government License](#)

Similarly, former President Roh Moo-hyun (노무현) visited a [Family Federation](#)-owned automobile factory in North Korea during an official trip, treating it as part of broader inter-Korean economic engagement. Again, the visit did not provoke accusations of improper church-state relations. These examples illustrate the article’s central question: if such actions were acceptable in the past, why are similar actions today treated as presumptive evidence of wrongdoing?

The author’s answer is that the actions themselves have not fundamentally changed; the political and media climate surrounding them has. Shifting public narratives, heightened polarization, and intensified scrutiny of certain religious organizations have transformed previously neutral or positive interactions into symbols of alleged corruption. In this environment, association alone becomes grounds for condemnation, regardless of intent or legality.

The [article](#) concludes with a broader reflection relevant far beyond South Korea. Governing a society requires more than laws and bureaucratic procedures. Political systems also rely on moral narratives, long-term vision, and social trust – areas where religious institutions often possess unique resources. When politics exploits religion for private gain, serious problems arise. But preventing all dialogue or cooperation between religion and politics, the author argues, is neither realistic nor desirable.



Jesus: “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17). Here, 2024-recreation of Christ based on the Shroud of Turin. Author: Jesus Christ. License: [CC ASA 2.5 Gen](#)



President of the Republic of Korea Kim Dae-jung, here on 27 th Feb. 2001. Photo: [www.kremlin.ru / ITAR-TASS / Sergei Velichkin, Vladimir Rodionov](#). License: [CC Attr 4.0](#)

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Especially in an era marked by demographic decline, social fragmentation, and global instability, the [Segye Ilbo article](#) suggests that carefully balanced cooperation – maintaining institutional distance while allowing ethical dialogue – can strengthen social resilience. The true challenge, then, is not how to eliminate interaction between religion and politics, but how to apply consistent standards of fairness, legality, and intent, regardless of which religion is involved.

In that sense, the debate is not merely about one religious organization or one country. It raises a universal question for pluralistic societies: can we distinguish principled secular governance from selective suspicion, and cooperation for the common good from corruption masquerading as morality?

See also [Climate of Suspicion: Peace Reframed as Politics](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Kim Dae-jung (김대중) – President of South Korea 1998–2003, cutting the celebration cake with [Father Moon](#), [Mother Han](#), and Lee Sang-hwe (이상희), 1st february 1999 at the 10th anniversary of [Segye Ilbo](#). Photo: [Segye Ilbo](#)

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