

## FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Japan's Abusive Regime to Control Children's Beliefs

Knut Holdhus  
June 8, 2026



Second-generation members [See editor's note below] of the Family Federation in Japan at a demonstration for religious freedom outside the parliament (Diet), protesting against abusive state persecution, May 4, 2025



*[Bitter Winter](#), the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights*



*Patricia Duval - Member of the Paris Bar Association, specializing in international human rights law. Has defended the rights of religious and faith minorities both in France and internationally (2025)*

### Human rights expert rings alarm bells over Japan's abusive approach to families belonging to large religious minority Family Federation

In the [second installment](#) of her [Bitter Winter](#) series, published on 2nd June 2026 and examining the consequences of Japan's campaign against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), international human rights attorney Patricia Duval argues that the controversy has progressed beyond efforts to dissolve the religious organization and entered a far more sensitive and consequential arena: the relationship between parents, children, and the state. According to Duval, recent government policies and public statements suggest an agenda that extends beyond regulating a religious movement, aiming instead to influence the beliefs, values, and identities of the children raised within it.

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The author notes that international human rights law recognizes not only freedom of religion but also the rights of parents to direct the moral and religious education of their children. This principle reflects the understanding that families play a primary role in transmitting values, traditions, and beliefs across generations. While governments may intervene in cases of

genuine abuse or neglect, Duval argues that disagreement with a family's religious convictions does not

constitute a legitimate basis for state interference.

Particularly troubling to her is the characterization of so-called "second-generation believers" [See editor's note below]. In the rhetoric of some "anti-cult" campaigners, individuals raised in religious households are portrayed as people who remain psychologically constrained by doctrines learned in childhood and who require assistance to escape them. Duval argues that such language presumes the invalidity of the beliefs themselves and denies the possibility that adults may freely choose to retain the faith in which they were raised. Under this logic, continued adherence becomes evidence of indoctrination rather than an expression of personal conviction. Paris-based attorney Duval points out,

"The argument that second generation followers [See editor's note below] 'suffer' and need help is a fabrication designed to justify the indoctrination of these children in Japanese public schools. The following developments show that, in reality, if there is any suffering, it is the result of the Japanese authorities' policy of stigmatization and the destruction of families."

The [article](#) also scrutinizes a government support plan introduced after the controversy surrounding the [Family Federation](#) intensified. Duval maintains that the measures outlined in the plan are directed largely toward children of believers, whom authorities appear to regard as potential victims requiring intervention. She contends that these policies are premised on the assumption that religious education within [Family Federation](#) families is inherently harmful and that children should be encouraged to distance themselves from the worldview of their parents.

Ultimately, Duval's argument is that the current trajectory of Japanese policy raises profound questions about the limits of state power in a democratic society. While governments have a legitimate interest in protecting children from abuse, she insists that this responsibility must be balanced against fundamental freedoms. The danger, in her assessment, is that efforts presented as child protection may actually be a campaign against religious transmission itself, particularly when directed at a disfavored minority faith. Duval writes,



"It is clear from this explanation that the goal is to prevent the children of [Unification Church](#) members from becoming believers and followers of that religion in the future."

This [second article](#) therefore frames the debate not simply as a dispute about one religious movement but as a broader test of principles that affect all families. If the state can classify the religious education provided by one group of parents as a form of harmful indoctrination because it conflicts with prevailing social norms, Duval suggests, the precedent may eventually extend far beyond the [Family Federation](#). The questions raised concern who

has the authority to shape children's beliefs. Duval has a clear answer,

"Yet it is precisely the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their own convictions that States Parties, including Japan, have sought to protect through Article 18(4) of the [ICCPR](#): 'The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.'"

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

**[Editor's note:** The term "second-generation members" generally refers to people who were raised in a religion by parents who belonged to a religious organization, rather than joining it themselves as adults.]

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The Event

On 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2026, in the [second installment](#) of her [Bitter Winter](#) series examining the consequences of Japan's campaign against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) – formerly known as the [Unification Church](#) – international



Logo of *Bitter Winter*, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights.



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

human rights attorney Patricia Duval argues that the assault on the [religious organization](#) has moved beyond the [dissolution](#) and entered a far more sensitive domain: the relationship between parents, children, and the state. Her [analysis](#) contends that recent policies and public statements reveal an effort not merely to regulate a religious movement but to reshape the beliefs and identities of the children raised within it.

See continuation: [Japan: Abusive State to Shape Children's Beliefs](#)

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Duval situates the debate within a broader struggle over religious freedom, parental rights, and state neutrality. According to her, the issue is no longer whether the [Family Federation](#) should retain legal status as a religious corporation. Rather, it is whether the Japanese authorities, encouraged by “anti-cult” activists and some academics, are justified in treating the religious upbringing provided by believing parents as a form of harm requiring government intervention.

The [article](#) highlights statements made by sociologist and Buddhist priest Yoshihide Sakurai (櫻井義秀), who has been involved in several campaigns against the [Family Federation](#).

He welcomed the [dissolution](#) of the [religious organization](#) but argued that the

measure alone would not solve what he considers the underlying problem. From this perspective belonging to the camp that wants to eradicate the [religious organization](#) completely, even if it loses its institutional structure, many believers will continue practicing their faith.



Sociologist with hostile view of the [Family Federation](#): Yoshihide Sakurai. Photo: *Bitter Winter*

Hostile activists point out that children raised in such families may remain influenced by the worldview transmitted by their parents. *National Network of Lawyers*



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*Against Spiritual Sales* claim that this influence can affect a child's ability to make independent choices and to adopt what they regard as the accepted norms of Japanese society.

Duval challenges this reasoning at its foundation. She argues that equating a religious worldview with an obstacle to social conformity places freedom of conscience at risk. In liberal democracies, she notes, the purpose of human rights protections is precisely to safeguard the ability of individuals and communities to hold beliefs that differ from prevailing social attitudes. Religious liberty would lose much of its meaning if governments could suppress or discourage beliefs simply because they diverge from majority expectations.

A central theme of the [article](#) is the distinction between social norms and human rights. Duval contends that some anti-cult advocates increasingly invoke the language of social integration and normality to justify intervention in religious families. She warns that such arguments invert the logic of international human rights law. Human rights instruments were created not to enforce conformity but to protect diversity of belief and conviction. Whether a religion is popular, unpopular, traditional, new, mainstream, or controversial should not determine the extent of the protection it receives.

To support this argument, Duval points to international standards governing freedom of religion and belief. She emphasizes that the protection of religious freedom extends beyond established faiths and includes minority religions, new religious movements, nonreligious convictions, and even the right not to believe. States are expected to remain neutral among competing worldviews and to refrain from discriminating against groups merely because they are unpopular or viewed with suspicion by the majority.

Against this backdrop, the [article](#) examines proposals advanced by "anti-cult" organizations and hostile lawyers who have advised the Japanese government. These advocates argue that children raised within strongly religious environments are not genuinely free in their religious choices because they adopt beliefs before reaching maturity. Consequently, they recommend exposing such children to "information" specifically designed to challenge the convictions taught by their parents. The stated objective is to restore what they describe as the children's capacity for independent and critical judgment.

Duval sees these proposals very differently. In her view, they amount to a program of ideological reeducation or faith-breaking [[See editor's note 1 below](#)]. She argues that the assumption underlying such measures is that children from [Family Federation](#) families are victims by definition, regardless of whether they themselves claim to have suffered any harm. Their religious identity is treated as evidence of manipulation rather than as a potentially legitimate outcome of family life and parental guidance. Patricia Duval writes,

"The plan published by the government in



**Accused of working in league with faith-breakers forcing believers into lawsuits and exploiting them to fit narrative: One of the architects of new law and advisor to the Japanese authorities: Masaki Kito (紀藤正樹), one of the hostile lawyers of National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (全国霊感商法被害対策弁連) and Nationwide Unification Church Damage Countermeasures Legal Team (全国統一教会被害対策弁護団).**  
Photo: Screenshot / [Bitter Winter](#)

January 2024 – titled ‘Proposed Measures to Enhance and Strengthen Support for Victims of the Former **Unification Church**’ – is entirely designed to reeducate the children of **Family Federation** members, who are considered victims even though they have not complained about anything. They are presumed to be under mind control [See editor's note 2 below] and must be de-indoctrinated so that they turn away from their parents' religion.”

*Continued in Japan: Abusive State to Shape Children's Beliefs*

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*More from Duval: Religious Freedom in Jeopardy After Dissolution*

**Text:** Knut Holdhus, editor

**Featured image** above: Second-generation **Family Federation** believers demonstrating for freedom of religion in Shibuya, Tokyo 29<sup>th</sup> April 2026. Photo: **Bitter Winter**

#### **[Editor's note 1: Coercive faith-breaking**

(“deprogramming”) 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. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. License: **CC ASA 3.0 Unp**. Cropped

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.]

**[Editor’s note 2:** In Japan, the **“mind-control” myth** has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or “brainwash” their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The “mind-control” myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive **“deprogramming”** of believers – sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan’s preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the **Family Federation**. A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived “mind-control” rhetoric to explain fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan’s restrictive religious climate. Overall, the “mind-control” myth functions less as a scientific or psychological concept and more as a moral panic – a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

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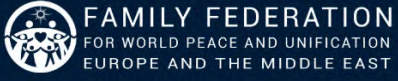
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## Unification Church in Japan: After the Dissolution, the Purge. 2. Targeting Believers' Children

by Patricia Duval | Jun 2, 2026 | [Op-eds Global](#)

New measures now focus on reshaping the upbringing of minors from believing families, raising serious concerns about parental rights and ideological neutrality.

by Patricia Duval. Article 2 of 4. [Read article 1.](#)



Yoshihide Sakurai. Screenshot.

Yoshihide Sakurai, another leading figure in the fight against heresy and “cults” in Japan, a professor of sociology at Hokkaido University, and a Nichiren Buddhist priest, recently [gave an interview](#) to the *Asahi Shimbun* on April 18, 2026. He stated that he had long recommended the dissolution of the Church and was pleased that it had been decided, but insisted that this measure was not sufficient. According to him, “the problems associated with the former Unification Church will not simply disappear. Many believers will continue practicing their faith even if the group loses its status as a religious corporation.”

In particular, he expressed concern that second generation believers “continue to suffer, well into adolescence and adulthood, from the effects of what may be called ‘religious abuse’ during their formative years”—referring to their religious education ordinary social norms may be impaired.” He added that “even when such children do not inherit the faith, they often remain strongly affected by their parents’ cognitive biases and by the worldview of the group.”

According to these advocates of thought control, the problem with parents’ religious beliefs lies in the worldview they instill in their children, which, they argue, prevents them from grasping the social norms and appropriate ways of thinking in Japanese society. This constitutes an unacceptable violation of the right to freedom of conscience and belief, as well as the right to live according to one’s chosen worldview and to raise one’s children accordingly.

It should be noted that it was precisely based on “social norms” that the civil courts ruled against the Church and that the High Court ordered the dissolution of its religious association. However, social norms must under no circumstances be used to determine whether a religion should be tolerated or not. All beliefs deserve protection, and the State has a duty to remain neutral in religious matters, as emphasized by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No. 22, which gives directions to State parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): “Article 18 protects theistic, nontheistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community.”

In contravention of these international standards, antiheresy and anticult activists are making increasingly extreme statements, calling for measures to prevent the practice of the Unification Church faith and “worldview” in Japan. Relying on the fallacious argument that religious education exerts undue influence, they proposed—and the government adopted—measures aimed at systematically “deindoctrinating” children from the education provided by their parents.

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Second-generation Unification Church members protest for freedom of religion in Tokyo. From Instagram.

In their Opinion submitted to the government, NNLASS lawyers argued that children do not voluntarily adopt their parents' religious beliefs because of their young age. Yet it is precisely the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their own convictions that States Parties, including Japan, have sought to protect through Article 18(4) of the ICCPR: "The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."

In violation of this protected right, NNLASS argues that, to enable children to regain their ability to choose "freely," they must be provided with "critical" information that challenges their parents' beliefs, so that they can regain their "critical thinking skills."

In their Opinion submitted to the government in December 2023, these lawyers provided the following description of the "problem" to justify the reeducation of children: "Individuals raised by parents who practice a particular religion—especially when they are forced to adopt that religion or are educated according to its teachings—are generally referred to as 'secondgeneration religious followers.'"

"Secondgeneration followers" are viewed as victims who have not yet realized the extent of their indoctrination and who must be reeducated to turn away from their parents' faith: "It has also become clear that individuals who grow up in such environments during the formative years of their personality often remain unable to break away from the religious doctrines instilled in them, even after reaching adulthood, resulting in longterm psychological instability and ongoing difficulties in daily life."

It is clear from this explanation that the goal is to prevent the children of Unification Church members from becoming believers and followers of that religion in the future.

The plan published by the government in January 2024—titled "Proposed Measures to Enhance and Strengthen Support for Victims of the 'Former Unification Church'"—is entirely designed to reeducate the children of Unification Church members, who are considered victims even though they have not complained about anything. They are presumed to be under mind control and must be deindoctrinated so that they turn away from their parents' religion.

The argument that second generation followers "suffer" and need help is a fabrication designed to justify the indoctrination of these children in Japanese public schools. The following developments show that, in reality, if there is any suffering, it is the result of the Japanese authorities' policy of stigmatization and the destruction of families.

[Japan, Religious Liberty, Unification Church](#)



**Patricia Duval**

**Patricia Duval** is an attorney and a member of the Paris Bar. She has a Master in Public Law from La Sorbonne University, and specializes in international human rights law. She has defended the rights of minorities of religion or belief in domestic and international fora, and before international 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.



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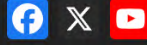
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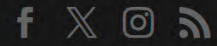


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