

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Using Abe's Murder Against Unificationism

Knut Holdhus
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Fumihiro Kato being interviewed



How the politics of reframing Abe's assassination created a modern-day witch hunt leading to the dissolution of the Family Federation in Japan

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[Interview]

Losing Sight of the Real Issue by Shifting the Focus

Four Years Since the Assassination of Former Prime Minister Abe

by Yoichiro Miyata (宮田陽一郎)



Flower offering for Abe Shinzo 8th July 2023 at Osaka Gokoku Shrines in Japan

The justification for ordering the dissolution of the Family Federation

8th July marks four years since the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三). The shocking incident - in which a former prime minister who had led the longest-serving administration in Japan's constitutional history was killed while delivering a campaign speech for the House of Councillors election - led to intense public criticism of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) after it became known that the defendant's mother was one of its members. This ultimately culminated in the [Supreme Court's confirmation](#) of a [court order](#) to dissolve the [religious organization](#).

Why did this lead to what the interview describes as an infringement of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion? We spoke with writer Fumihiro Kato (加藤文宏).

Interviewer: Yoichiro Miyata (宮田陽一郎)

"How do you view the four years since Abe's assassination?"

I think they have been four years during which we lost sight of the essence of the issue. The starting point - and ultimately the conclusion - of losing sight of the real issue was that the shooting was reframed as a problem concerning politics and religion.

As a result, Japanese society came to feel compelled to justify the [dissolution order](#) against the [Family Federation](#) and human rights violations committed against its members. These four years have been marked by the contradiction that people have become unable to criticize those developments.

Even regarding the issue of religion and politics, there has never been any evidence that the Liberal Democratic Party was forced by the [religious organization](#) to adopt particular policies or submit specific bills, nor any evidence that the public actually suffered harm as a result. Yet society as a whole was swept along nonetheless.

In the end, even the judiciary found itself embracing contradictions in order to legitimize the prevailing social atmosphere and political decisions, and those contradictions ultimately took the form of the [dissolution order](#) against the [Family Federation](#).

In that sense, we continue to lose sight of the true nature of the issue that began with Abe's assassination.



Tetsuya Yamagami given life sentence. AI illustration: Chat GPT

"On 21st January, the Nara District Court sentenced Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), who killed Abe, to life imprisonment. Although the defense appealed, do you think the case has now been resolved?"

I think it remains far from resolved because the judiciary, politics, and society as a whole have lost the ability to make fair judgments and assessments about the case. Even on appeal, the defense team will essentially have no choice but to make the same arguments they presented in the district court.

Immediately after Abe was assassinated, the discussion was shifted to the relationship between religion and politics. Then, using the keyword "donations", it was shifted again into an issue of religion and [consumer problems](#). The subject changed once, then again, becoming something entirely different.

More about "consumer problems": [Terms from Consumer Law Used to Rob Faith](#)

Even if the appeal leads to a new trial in the High Court, the issue will simply continue to be reframed repeatedly, so we will never get any closer to the core of the matter. Nor will it become an opportunity for society to reflect on what happened.

The framing of the issue as one of religion and [consumer problems](#) is something that Yamagami himself rejects. It was not that he was unable to attend university; rather, he had become so disillusioned with society at the time that he simply did not want to go.

His mother reportedly told him, "I'll find whatever money is necessary, so please go to university. It's fine even if you have to spend another year preparing." That is beyond doubt.

Therefore, I do not believe the defendant himself was a victim of religion. Instead, the defense team's courtroom publicity campaign led society's understanding in the wrong direction, and it has become very difficult to correct that perception.



The scene of the assassination of Shinzo Abe in front of Yamato-Saidaiji Station in Nara City, Japan

"After Abe's assassination, the media harshly criticized the Family Federation. What do you see as the problems with that coverage?"

The sensational reporting and entertainment-style scandal coverage directed at what was then the [Unification Church](#) during the 1980s and 1990s was simply repeated after Abe's assassination. The essential nature of the reporting did not change.

From the 2000s until the incident in 2022, the [Family Federation](#) had largely faded from public attention as a religious organization, and people generally did not criticize its members. Public memories of those who had been the subject of controversy in the 1980s and 1990s had also faded.

After Abe's assassination, the issue was reframed as one involving religion and [consumer problems](#). However, because there were no such controversies in the 2020s, critics of the [Family Federation](#) had no new means of attacking it.

As a result, they had little choice but to recycle the gossip and scandals from the 1980s and 1990s.

There were, however, two important differences from that earlier period.

The first was that Abe's public assassination was an extremely shocking event that had already created an atmosphere of widespread public shock.

The second was that the idea that ordinary people could easily become victims of severe [consumer problems](#) was presented as though it were a reality, by making use of Yamagami and other so-called "second-generation" members [See editor's note below] of religious groups.

Profile: Fumihiro Kato

Fumihiro Kato (加藤文宏) was born in 1964 in Shizuoka Prefecture. In addition to publishing novels under the pen name Fumi Kato, he founded the magazine Monthly IJ, where he interviewed people from a wide range of backgrounds.

Following the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident, he focused on reputational damage and issues affecting voluntary evacuees, paying particular attention to what he describes as "information disasters" caused by media coverage.

He has contributed analytical articles and essays - primarily concerning media-related issues - to opinion journals and other publications.

His book Examining Runaway Media Coverage organizes and analyzes developments from the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) through the government's request for a dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)).

[Editor's note: The term 宗教2世 (shūkyō nisei, literally "second-generation religious believer") 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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Editorial Challenges



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Religious Leaders Face Arrests as U.S. Officials Investigate

Religious Freedom Under Pressure in Japan and South Korea

by editorial staff of the [Sekai Nippo](#) [See editor's note below]

Japan and South Korea are both prosperous, successful democracies and key allies of the United States. However, concerns have recently been raised as both countries have shown increasing signs of restricting religious freedom.

In June, Japan's [Supreme Court](#) dismissed a [special appeal](#) filed by the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) against the government's [March 2025 dissolution order](#). As a result, the dissolution of the [religious organization](#) has become final.

A similar trend is unfolding in South Korea. The Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration has placed [several Christian church leaders under investigation](#) on various charges, and the National Assembly is currently deliberating legislation that would grant the government the authority to dissolve churches.



Lee Man-hee (이만희 – 95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth). Photo: [MBC PD수첩](#) / Wikimedia Commons.
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On 24th June, [Lee Man-hee](#) (이만희 – 95), founder of the conservative Christian church *Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony* (Shincheonji), was [arrested](#) on suspicion of coercing church members to engage in political activities.

At



Pastor Son Hyun-bo, here August 2025. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

the end of last year, Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of Busan Segyero Church (세계로교회) was [imprisoned for several months](#) for violating the *Public Official Election Act* after leading demonstrations opposing President Lee Jae-myung (이재명).

In addition, [Hak Ja Han](#) ((한학자 – 83), president of the [Family Federation](#), has been [detained since September](#) of last year on bribery charges related to allegedly giving luxury handbags and other gifts to former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희). [Han](#) denies the allegations but is [currently hospitalized](#) due to heart disease, glaucoma, and injuries sustained in a fall. She may be returned to custody once she recovers.

On 10th July, prosecutors [requested a sentence of 13 years'](#) imprisonment for [Han](#).

These cases have intensified debate over where the boundary should be drawn between religion and politics.

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In South Korea, independent lawmaker Choi Hyuk-jin (최혁진) introduced a [bill](#) on 9th January of this year to partially amend the Civil Code. South Korean media have dubbed it the “[Church Dissolution Act](#)” because of its contents.

The backdrop to the [legislation](#) is the declaration of martial law by then-President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) in December 2024, which led to the collapse of his administration. Since the Lee administration took office, a series of investigations has targeted individuals connected to the former Yoon government.

If enacted, the [bill](#) would give the South Korean government the authority to dissolve religious organizations, seize their assets, and regulate their religious activities.

Those opposing the [bill](#) are seeking support both domestically and internationally.

The conservative opposition *People Power Party* told *The Washington Times*,

“Freedom of religion is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution, and we will do everything in our power to prevent the enactment of the ‘[Church Dissolution Act](#).”

The party’s leader, Jang Dong-hyeok (장동혁), also told the foreign press corps,

“Like other democratic nations, South Korea recognizes every citizen’s freedom of religion. However, under the Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration, this important value has been seriously undermined.”



Jang Dong-hyeok’s Portrait, 13th February 2026. Photo: [국민의힘TV](#) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#). Cropped.

Earlier this month, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Riley Barnes, acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for DRL Julie Turner, *White House Faith Office* liaison Belsis Romero, and embassy officials visited *Busan Segyero Church* (세계로교회) and met with Pastor Son.

The findings of their investigation are expected to be included in a report scheduled for publication later this year.

Chance Son (찬스 손), the pastor’s son, explained that “the momentum behind the [bill](#) has temporarily stalled,” but that it remains under review by the *National Assembly’s Legislation and Judiciary Committee*. He added,

“If the [bill](#) begins moving forward again, we will respond swiftly in accordance with biblical teachings.”

(Seoul / Special Correspondent for The Washington Times)

[Editor’s note: The [Sekai Nippo](#) article is an abridged and lightly edited Japanese adaptation of a report by Andrew Salmon published in *The Washington Times* 10th July titled “[America’s leading Asian allies pummel freedom of religion](#)”.]

Featured image above: Japan’s Supreme Court and South Korea’s National Assembly making decisions affecting freedom of religion. Illustration: ChatGPT, 15th July 2026.

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