

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan permits businesses to deny service based on customer's religion

Knut Holdhus
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Featured image above: Yoshihiro Tsuda (pseudonym), who was refused a real estate contract, in the morning of the 10th August 2024 in Ibaraki Prefecture

Members of religious minority denied contracts because of their faith



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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 3: Believers Suffering Discrimination and Human Rights Violations

Discrimination felt by the cancellation of contracts

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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Committed heinous crime: Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan and blamed it on the Unification Church

The news coverage surrounding the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became a major sensation when police information emerged shortly after the incident. This information stated that Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), the accused, harbored resentment toward the high monetary donations made by his mother, a member of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)). The criticism of the [Family Federation](#) became so intense and frequent that it overshadowed the heinous nature of the crime itself.

Amidst this, members of the [Family Federation](#) began to experience various forms of victimization, including discrimination, verbal and physical abuse, and damage to property.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the [Family Federation](#)'s registration as a religious corporation. At an international symposium held in France in June, international lawyer Tatsuki Nakayama (中山達樹) emphasized that "during this period, the [Family Federation](#) has never been involved in any criminal activities."

However, the Kishida administration, without going through the Cabinet, changed the interpretation of the Religious Corporations Act overnight. They decided to include "acts that are unlawful according to civil law" as a condition for exercising the right to question religious organizations. Consequently, the government petitioned the courts to issue a dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#) based on the Religious Corporations Act. As a result, many members are concerned that discrimination and harm will increase even further.

There are also problems affecting daily life, such as difficulties in making purchases. At a press conference on 7th November last year, [Family Federation](#) Chairman Tomihiro Tanaka (田中富広) cited cases such as "being refused real estate contracts", "being denied the purchase of flowers or catered lunch

boxes", and "a famous automobile manufacturer banning the sale of cars, making it impossible to buy one".

One such case occurred in March at a Nissan-affiliated used car dealership in Aichi Prefecture, where an employee of the [Family Federation](#) in the same prefecture attempted to purchase a car under the [organization's](#) name but was refused. Although there was no issue when the employee initially expressed the intention to purchase under the [organization's](#) name, they were later contacted by the dealership's representative, who informed them that the sale could not proceed despite the contract (under the [organization's](#) name) having already been stamped.



Tomihiko Tanaka, here at press conference in Tokyo 7th Nov. 2023



Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama

When the representative was contacted by phone for confirmation, he explained that the refusal was because the [Family Federation](#) was "a group that has caused public concern" and was "facing a request for a dissolution order from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology", making it "socially inappropriate, and not suitable for the company to engage with".

In Tokyo, a Toyota-affiliated used car dealership also canceled a vehicle purchase contract after the payment had been made and the delivery date set. In September last year, a church employee visited the dealership, requested a quote, and expressed the intention to purchase under the [organization's](#) name. While exchanging documents and setting the delivery date, the dealership contacted them on 10th October of the same year, stating they wanted to cancel the vehicle sale contract. The reason given was again "a decision based on public opinion".

The church employee in charge said,

"This clearly feels like discrimination to us. We had paid the money and set the delivery date, but the unilateral cancellation left us very depressed."

The [Family Federation](#) has sent letters of protest to both companies through their lawyer, demanding the sales refusal be retracted, citing unfair discrimination and prejudice.

There have also been difficulties with real estate contracts.

Yoshihiro Tsuda (pseudonym), an employee of the [Family Federation](#) living in Ibaraki Prefecture, faced rejection from a guarantor company when he tried to rent a property under his name for his parents to relocate to last year.



Tsuda recalls,

"Because my elderly parents had to quit their jobs, they needed to move out of the house they lived in. Since my parents and my sister's family all lived in Saitama, I was looking for a property within Saitama Prefecture."

In September of last year, Tsuda found a suitable property, and after consulting with the real estate company, he filled out the contract on behalf of his parents, including his name, occupation, and income. He explains,

"The real estate company seemed to think it would probably be okay, as they were only focused on the income aspect, but later, I received a notification that the application had been halted during the review process."

He was not given a detailed reason for the rejection. Tsuda was left with an uneasy feeling, suspecting that his religious beliefs may have negatively impacted the contract.

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Suicides Due To Biased Reporting By Media

August 15, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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Waves of biased reporting by media in Japan after the Abe assassination in 2022 led to several suicides among the youth of religious minority

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by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

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Nozomi Kojima. Photo: FFWPU

According to Nozomi Kojima (小嶋希晶) (28), a representative of the “*Association to Protect the Human Rights of Second-Generation Believers*”, several second-generation individuals have committed suicide since the media coverage of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the Unification Church) became too heated. Kojima points out, “Many second-generation individuals are being hurt without us even realizing it.”

Two years ago, Sayoko Okawa (pseudonym), a woman in her 60s living in Saitama Prefecture and a *Family Federation* believer, lost her eldest daughter, Megumi (pseudonym, 27 at the time), to suicide. Although no suicide note was left behind, Okawa believes that the intense media coverage of the *religious organization* was the cause. She says,

“Criticism of the church probably sounded like slander against her parents, which must have been stressful for her. She was a gentle and sensitive child.”

Okawa regrets that due to her activities as a believer, caring for her ailing parents, and running the retail business of books and stationery inherited from her parents, she found it difficult to spend quality time with her family.

When Megumi was in middle school, she began to frequently skip school due to bullying and other issues. After visiting a psychiatric clinic, she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After obtaining her high school diploma, she worked in several jobs, including factory work and as a temporary employee. However, she faced interpersonal and work-related troubles, and in March 2022, she quit her job where she had been employed under a disability quota. Since then, she had been staying at home.

Nevertheless, her relationship with her mother was good, and within the family, they had the “closest relationship where they could talk about anything” (according to Sayoko). They often went to karaoke together. Although Megumi was not a church member, she would participate in church events and seminars when invited and had also visited facilities related to the *Family Federation* in South Korea.

However, after the shooting incident involving former Prime Minister Abe, things changed dramatically. As media criticism of the church increased on TV and the internet, her relationship with Megumi began to become strained.



Influenced negatively by biased reporting.
Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 15th August 2024.

One day, while Okawa was talking with a fellow believer near her home, Megumi suddenly slammed the door shut with a loud “bang!” Such behavior had never happened before, so Okawa was surprised. Megumi also once angrily asked, “How much debt do you have?” Okawa suspects that Megumi’s actions and words were influenced by the stories of former believers that were featured in the

critical media reports.

On one occasion, Megumi did not return home late at night, and even by morning, she had not come back. Worried, Okawa visited Megumi’s friends and eventually, one of them showed her a message Megumi had sent via social media. The message contained words hinting at suicide, saying, “I’m just so tired.”

Okawa spent the entire morning searching for her daughter but couldn’t find any trace of her. Just as she was about to file a missing person report, she received news at work that Megumi’s body had been found. Okawa, looking down, says,

“Even though we lived together, I couldn’t realize how much she had been hurt. I feel so useless and regretful because of that.”

In addition to the suicide hints, Megumi’s message contained an unfounded belief that her mother was trying to use her as a “cash cow”.

According to Okawa, when Megumi was still working, there were a few

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times when Okawa temporarily borrowed a small amount of money, a few thousand yen, from Megumi to save the time and hassle of going to the bank. She had also encouraged Megumi to find a new job after she quit her previous one. Okawa believes Megumi might have misunderstood these actions. Okawa expresses her frustration, saying,

"The biased media coverage has caused me to lose both the bond with my daughter and her trust."

Recently, Okawa has distanced herself somewhat from the local church due to interpersonal issues, but she remains outraged by the government's request for a dissolution order, calling it "unjust". She fears that if the dissolution order is finalized, even more people will suffer, just like Megumi did.

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Featured image above: Sayoko Okawa (not her real name) holds her late daughter's smartphone, 22nd June 2024, Saitama Prefecture. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀) / [Sekai Nippo](#).

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