

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Japan's Treatment of Faith Headed to the ICC?

Knut Holdhus
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The International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague, Netherlands



Experts in international criminal law think Japan's treatment of Family Federation may constitute "crimes against humanity" and end up before the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague

The question of how far a democratic state can go in tolerating - or even enabling - violations of fundamental rights becomes particularly acute when those violations are directed at a religious minority. In their 4th May 2026 [article](#) in [Bitter Winter](#), Javier Ruiz and Cristian González, legal experts in international criminal law and human rights, argue that the situation surrounding members of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)) in Japan may cross a critical legal threshold: that of crimes against humanity under international law.



Javier Ruiz, an ICC-qualified counsel

Their [analysis](#) is not framed as advocacy in a narrow sense, but as a legal assessment grounded in the framework of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and supported by a wide range of publicly available documentation.

At the core of their argument lies a foundational principle of human rights law: no individual should be deprived of liberty without due process. This norm is not merely a domestic legal safeguard but a cornerstone of international legal order. When violations of this principle occur in a systematic or widespread manner - especially with the knowledge or tacit approval of state authorities - they may rise to the level of international crimes.

Ruiz and González contend that this is precisely the concern raised by the longstanding treatment of Family Federation members in Japan.



Human Rig Without Frontiers

Drawing on reports from NGOs such as Human Rights Without Frontiers, publications including Bitter Winter, testimonies from alleged victims, and observations issued by United Nations bodies, the authors describe a pattern of conduct extending over several decades. This pattern allegedly includes forced abductions, prolonged confinement, coercive attempts to compel individuals to abandon their religious beliefs, and the strategic use of legal mechanisms to weaken the targeted [religious](#)

[organization](#).

They emphasize that their conclusions are based on evidence already in the public domain, viewed through the interpretive lens of international criminal jurisprudence developed by institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and earlier tribunals.

A central focus of their analysis is the practice commonly referred to as "deprogramming" (faith-breaking) [See editor's note below]. While the term suggests a therapeutic or voluntary process, the authors argue that it obscures a far more coercive reality. According to the evidence they cite, deprogramming in Japan has frequently involved the abduction and confinement of adult believers - often by their own family members acting under the guidance of religious or "anti-cult" actors. Victims are allegedly held in controlled environments, sometimes for extended periods, where they are subjected to sustained psychological pressure and, in some cases, physical abuse, with the aim of forcing them to renounce their faith.

The scale of this phenomenon is a key element of the legal argument. Reports indicate that [thousands of individuals](#) may have been subjected to such treatment since the 1980s. The authors stress that this is not a matter of isolated incidents but of a recurring and structured practice. The existence of manuals, coordinated actors, and consistent methods suggests a degree of organization that aligns with what international criminal law defines as a "systematic" pattern of abuse.



Dr. Hirohisa Koide [speaking at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland 16th June 2025](#)

One illustrative case highlighted in the discussion involves Dr. [Hirohisa Koide](#) (小出浩久), a Japanese physician, who was allegedly abducted and held for many months under conditions designed to restrict his movement and isolate him from outside contact. Even when legal remedies were pursued, including a habeas corpus petition, enforcement appears to have been ineffective. According to the account, the individual ultimately secured release only by falsely claiming to have abandoned his beliefs. For Ruiz and González, such cases exemplify conduct that goes beyond mere family disputes or private interventions and enters the realm of unlawful detention.

To evaluate whether these acts could constitute crimes against humanity, the authors turn to Article 7 of the Rome Statute, the international treaty that founded the International Criminal Court in 2002. This provision defines such crimes as certain acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed

against a civilian population. Crucially, the legal standard does not require the existence of armed conflict. Past decisions by ICC chambers have clarified that an "attack" can consist of a pattern of mistreatment, whether violent or non-violent, provided it is carried out in an organized manner.

Applying this framework, Ruiz and González argue that both the "widespread" and "systematic" criteria may be satisfied in the Japanese context. The [number of alleged victims](#), the duration of the conduct, and its geographic spread all support the characterization of widespread impact. At the same time, the apparent coordination among different actors - families, religious figures, and legal professionals - along with the repeated use of similar tactics, points to a systematic approach rather than random or spontaneous occurrences.



The Human Rights Committee, a subpage on the site of the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

However, what elevates the issue from a serious domestic concern to a potential matter of international criminal jurisdiction is the role attributed to the state. The authors highlight that Japanese authorities have, over many years, reportedly failed to intervene effectively in cases of alleged forced confinement, often treating them as private family matters.

This pattern of non-intervention is documented in reports and was explicitly noted by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which urged Japan to take steps to protect individuals from coercion affecting their religious freedom.

More recent developments, according to the [article](#), suggest a shift from passive tolerance to more active forms of institutional pressure against the large [religious minority](#). Following high-profile political events in 2022, the Japanese government initiated legal proceedings aimed at dissolving the [religious organization](#) under existing religious corporation laws. Additional policy measures and public discourse have been criticized by some observers as disproportionately targeting the same community. Ruiz and González suggest that such actions may contribute to a climate (an environment) in which discrimination is normalized.

Within this broader context, the authors identify three specific categories of crimes against humanity that could be implicated. The first is the severe deprivation of physical liberty, which encompasses acts of unlawful detention such as those described in deprogramming [See editor's note below] cases. The second is persecution, defined as the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights on discriminatory grounds - in this instance, religion. This can include not only physical coercion but also social and legal measures that collectively disadvantage a targeted group. The third is enforced disappearance, which involves both the deprivation of liberty and the concealment of the victim's fate or whereabouts from those seeking information.



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, one of the hostile lawyers of National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales and Nationwide Unification Church Damage Countermeasures Legal Team

An additional dimension of the analysis concerns the role of National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, a group of lawyers known for their opposition to the [Family Federation](#). Ruiz and González argue that their activities, as described in various reports, may go beyond conventional legal advocacy. Instead, they suggest the possibility of coordinated efforts to undermine the [religious organization](#) through litigation strategies, support for deprogramming [See editor's note below] practices, and the pursuit of dissolution proceedings. If accurate, such conduct could raise complex questions about the misuse of legal systems to achieve outcomes that are discriminatory in nature.

The issue of accountability is then framed in terms of the ICC's principle of complementarity, which defines ICC as a court of last resort, designed to complement rather than replace national criminal systems. The Court is designed to act only when national systems are unwilling or unable to genuinely investigate and prosecute serious crimes. In this case, the authors argue that the absence of criminal proceedings against those allegedly responsible for deprogramming [See editor's note below] - combined with state actions directed against the victim group - may indicate a lack of willingness to address the underlying violations. This, in their view, strengthens the argument for potential international scrutiny.

The [article](#) concludes by emphasizing that the rule of law must apply consistently, regardless of the setting. Systematic abuses, even in stable and prosperous democracies, require serious examination when they affect fundamental rights on a large

scale. Ruiz and González stop short of making definitive legal determinations but assert that the available evidence is sufficient to warrant careful consideration by international mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court.

Ultimately, their position is that accountability is both a legal obligation and an ethical necessity. Where domestic remedies have failed over extended periods, international law provides a framework - however complex and politically sensitive - for addressing patterns of abuse that might otherwise remain unresolved.

Javier Ruiz from Argentina is an ICC-qualified counsel with extensive experience appearing before international courts and tribunals.

Cristian González from Colombia is a legal consultant focused on international criminal law and human rights litigation, with broad experience in proceedings before international courts and tribunals.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[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

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.



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.

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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An [article](#) published 4th May 2026 on the online news platform of the



large South Korean TV network MBN (Maeil Broadcasting Network) carried the headline “‘Family Is Hope’... In the Era of Low Birth Rates, the ‘True Family Movement’ Draws Attention”.

See also [2,100 Couples in Global Blessing Ceremony](#)

The first summary bullet below the headline runs:

“[Family Federation](#) successfully holds [mass wedding](#) for [2,100 couples](#) from 70 countries [... a direct challenge to the trends of non-marriage and low birth rates”



From the large international [Marriage Blessing](#) ceremony for 2,100 couples in Gapyeong, South Korea on 2nd May 2026. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Basically, MBN News reporter Lee Sang-joo (이상주) writes about the large [Marriage Blessing](#) ceremony in Gapyeong on 2nd May but angles his report as describing a potential solution to South Korea’s persistently low birth rate and breakdown of family structures.

The country now has the lowest birth rate among OECD countries. The problem has evolved from a demographic concern into a structural crisis with far-reaching economic, social, and cultural implications. Declining marriage rates, the rise of single-person households, and shifting attitudes toward parenthood have collectively contributed to what some policymakers describe as a “national extinction” trajectory.

Against this backdrop, renewed attention is being directed toward initiatives that attempt not merely to incentivize childbirth through policy, but to reframe the cultural and ethical foundations of family life itself. One such initiative, as highlighted by the report from the MBN culture desk, is the so-called “True Family Movement” [\[See editor’s note below\]](#), which positions the restoration of family structures as a central lever in addressing demographic decline.

At the core of this discussion is the recognition that South Korea’s fertility crisis is not solely an economic issue driven by housing costs, job insecurity, or childcare burdens – although these are undeniably significant factors. It is also deeply tied to evolving social norms, where [marriage](#) and childrearing are increasingly viewed as optional or even undesirable.

In this context, the large-scale “2026 Hyojeong Cosmic [Blessing](#) Ceremony”, held on 2nd May, emerges as both a symbolic and practical counterpoint to prevailing trends. The event brought together [2,100 couples](#) from 70 countries, all committing to [marriage](#) and family formation under a shared value system centered on what

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formation under a shared value system centered on what organizers describe as “[true love](#)”.

From a policy-analysis perspective, what makes this development noteworthy is not simply the scale of the ceremony, but the model it proposes. The movement emphasizes two interrelated strategies: fostering multicultural family formation and promoting a cultural shift toward larger families. These elements directly challenge two major drivers of low fertility in South Korea – social homogeneity and the perceived high cost (both financial and personal) of raising children.

By encouraging cross-national [marriages](#), the initiative implicitly addresses demographic stagnation while also contributing to a more diverse and inclusive social fabric. At the same time, its explicit endorsement of multi-child families seeks to normalize higher fertility within a supportive community framework.



From the large international [Marriage Blessing](#) ceremony for 2,100 couples in Gapyeong, South Korea on 2nd May 2026. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Critically, the movement frames family not as a private lifestyle choice, but as a foundational social institution with broader implications for societal stability. This perspective was reinforced by the participation of global religious figures at the [Gapyeong event](#). They characterized the family as the “school of humanity” – a primary site for transmitting values, fostering social cohesion, and mitigating conflict.

While such assertions are rooted in moral and philosophical traditions, they intersect with empirical observations: societies with stronger family cohesion often exhibit higher levels of social trust and resilience. In this sense, the movement’s emphasis on ethical reconstruction aligns with a growing body of discourse suggesting that financial incentives alone are insufficient to reverse demographic decline.

The [MBN article](#) ponts out,

“The [event](#) suggests that in the face of the massive wave of declining birth rates, the fundamental [value of ‘family’](#) may serve as the most powerful solution for our society.”

The initiative by the [Family Federation](#) may well be able to play a major role in solving the family breakdown problem of South Korea. Possible challenges the initiative may face include gender inequality in domestic labor, intense educational competition, and rigid labor market structures. The “True Family Movement” [[See editor’s note below](#)] addresses the cultural dimension effectively, but its long-term impact will likely depend on whether it can be accompanied by broader institutional reforms – such as workplace flexibility, childcare infrastructure, and gender equity policies.

Nonetheless, the movement introduces a critical reframing of the issue: that reversing demographic decline may require not only economic recalibration but also a renewed articulation of social values. By promoting

[marriage](#), cross-cultural integration, and multi-child family norms within a supportive community network, it offers a prototype for how cultural renewal might complement policy interventions.

The [event](#) described in the [report](#) by Lee Sang-joo (이상주) can be interpreted as more than a ceremonial gathering; it represents an attempt to put into action a value-driven response to one of South Korea's most pressing challenges. Whether this approach can achieve measurable demographic impact remains to be seen, but it underscores an important point: sustainable solutions to low birth rates may ultimately depend on aligning economic realities with a clearly defined societal vision of family life.

Also other major news outlets mentioned the issue of South Korea low birth rate. TV Chosun wrote on 2nd May,



“A representative of the Family Federation stated, ‘In order to address the issue of low birth rates, we will continue to uphold family ethics and promote peace activities that break down barriers of nationality and race.’”

The news agency News 1 commented on 2nd May,



“The Family Federation described the core meaning of the blessing ceremony as ‘a practical peace movement toward a world as one family’, linking it to the issue of low birth rates. With South Korea’s total fertility rate at 0.8 – the lowest among OECD countries – the organization stated that it aims to use the event as an opportunity to reaffirm the value of family in response to the spread of non-marriage trends.”

The finance paper Bridge Economy wrote on 2nd May,



“The event is also drawing attention as an alternative response to the low birth rate crisis. With South Korea’s total fertility rate ranking the lowest among OECD countries, the Family Federation’s blessing wedding ceremony has served as an opportunity to re-highlight the importance of family in response to the spread of non-marriage culture.”

See also [2,100 Couples in Global Blessing Ceremony](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: From the large international [Marriage Blessing](#) ceremony for 2,100 couples in Gapyeong, South Korea on 2nd May 2026. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

[Editor’s note: The [“True Family Movement”](#) (참가정 운동) is not a generic social campaign – it’s a concept and organized initiative tied to the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) – in Korea often referred to as [Unificationism](#) – a movement that originated from the teachings of Sun Myung Moon and Hak Ja Han.

The term refers to a spiritually grounded model of family life based on ideas from Unificationism. “True Family” is a

me based on ideas from Unitarianism. True Family is a doctrinal concept: a family formed through a marriage blessed by the movement, centered on what it calls "true love", and aligned with God's ideal.

It emphasizes marriage as essential and universal (discouraging lifelong singlehood), lifelong union between one man and one woman, having multiple children as a positive moral good, personal development based on relationships within the family, culminating in marital love and parental love.

So the "movement" is essentially a global campaign to promote and expand this model of family, both among members and in broader society.

The "Marriage Blessing Ceremony" pairs or affirms couples (sometimes internationally matched), is seen as spiritually significant, not just ceremonial, functions as the primary mechanism for creating these "true families"]

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