

Rights group questions backlash against Unification Church after Abe assassination

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Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida speaks during a news conference at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2022. Kishida has said his ruling party will cut ties with the Unification Church following a widening scandal triggered by former leader Shinzo Abe's assassination last month. A prominent European religious freedom group wants the top United Nations human rights body to examine what it claims has been a "campaign of intolerance, discrimination, and persecution of the Unification Church" in Japan following the July assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. (AP Photo/Shuji Kajiyama, Pool)

A prominent European religious freedom group wants the top United Nations human rights body to examine what it claims has been a "campaign of intolerance, discrimination, and persecution of the [Unification Church](#)" in [Japan](#) following the July assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#).

The call by the [Paris](#)-based Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience (CAP-LC) is the latest fallout from the shooting of Mr. [Abe](#) by a gunman who claimed to have a personal grievance with the [church](#) and the political reckoning it has sparked in Japanese politics. Japanese officials of the [Unification Church](#) quickly condemned the assassination and vowed to work with officials investigating the incident.

The secular non-government organization made the claim in a formal statement recently to the [U.N. Human Rights Committee](#), calling for the [Geneva-based committee](#) to review the claim at its annual session examining rights violations claims around the world.

A review of the issue at the [committee](#)'s gathering beginning Oct. 10 would amount to a significant new twist in the evolving fallout from the Abe assassination, which has thrust a spotlight onto the delicate intersection between religion and politics in [Japan](#).

"During the course of this campaign, the human rights of the members of the Unification Church in Japan were seriously, systematically, and blatantly violated," according to the CAP-LC statement.

The investigation into the July 8 killing is ongoing, and Japanese authorities say a psychological evaluation of Mr. Abe's alleged shooter, 41-year-old Tetsuya Yamagami, will carry on until at least late November.

But the suspect's reported claim to have targeted Mr. [Abe](#) out of anger over the former prime minister's ties to the [Unification Church](#) has sparked a media storm in [Japan](#) against the church, whose members say

they're facing death threats and other forms of harassment.

Despite questions about the shooting suspect's psychological well-being, some Japanese media outlets have reported that Mr. Yamagami targeted Mr. [Abe](#) because [his](#) mother had been bankrupted by large donations [she](#) made to the church, also called the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification \(FFWPU\)](#).

The media pressure has coincided with political scrutiny of interactions between Mr. [Abe](#)'s conservative ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the [Unification Church](#), which has a long history of standing against religious oppression by communist governments.

Leftist political activists in [Japan](#), including several within the fringe Japanese Communist Party, have demanded investigations into "collusion" between the [FFWPU](#) and [Japan](#)'s lawmakers.

Church representatives and LDP leaders assert there is no evidence of such. But the spiraling media and political pressure campaign has reached to current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who has sought to clarify connections between the government and the [FFWPU](#).

Mr. Kishida announced a major Cabinet shake-up last month, spurred in part by what Tokyo political insiders say was an effort to reassign or demote officials with past interactions with the [FFWPU](#).

The LDP more recently said it had conducted an internal survey that found nearly half of of the party's lawmakers have had at least some level of interaction with the [FFWPU](#).

With the LDP known for fostering positive ties with a number of faith-based organizations - a natural part of its political base - Mr. Kishida has claimed the [FFWPU](#) has not influenced the party's policymaking.

However, the prime minister has vowed to strengthen internal controls on ties between LDP members and the [Unification Church](#), while Japan's Consumer Affairs Agency has also opened a probe into [FFWPU](#) activities in the country.

[Unification Church](#) have spoken out against "biased news coverage" in the wake of the Abe assassination, asserting that "abusive" reporting has included "hate speech" and "encourages religious discrimination" against the [FFWPU](#).

Church representatives say unfair coverage has resulted in a "bizarre situation" in which criticism of the [FFWPU](#) in [Japan](#) has become more heated than that for the shooter who killed Mr. [Abe](#).

Rev. Tomihiro Tanaka, who heads the [Japan](#) branch of the church, told a press conference in Tokyo last month that the coverage amounts to "religious persecution" and risks triggering violence against believers.

"Our churches in [Japan](#) have been subject to death threats and threatening phone calls, abusive language blasting out of sound trucks, and obstruction of assemblies, with some members of the media harassing ordinary members," Rev. Tanaka said.

The [Unification Church](#) opened its first [Japan](#) chapter in 1959 and has grown to have some 300,000 believers in the country today. Membership, as well as financial support from followers, grew during [Japan](#)'s rise as a global economic power in the 1980s.

The [Unification Church](#) was founded in 1954 by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, a fierce proponent of religious freedom. What began with a tiny, embattled church he founded in South Korea has evolved through the decades into a global spiritual movement and an affiliated commercial empire comprising hundreds of ventures in more than a half-dozen countries, including The Washington Times.

The [Paris](#)-based CAP-LC underscored Rev. Tanaka's claims in its recent statement to the [U.N. Human Rights Committee](#), which operates under the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and oversees the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - a U.N. treaty to which [Japan](#) is a signatory.

The CAP-LC also raised questions about the reported motivations of Mr. [Abe](#)'s killer.

"[His](#) mother's bankruptcy, as [he](#) reported himself, caused Yamagami's hatred for the [Unification Church](#)," the CAP-LC's said in its statement. "However, the bankruptcy occurred in 2002 and Yamagami killed [Abe](#) in 2022, twenty years later. What triggered Yamagami's killing frenzy in 2022, and not before?"

The statement went on to assert that "Yamagami followed the hate campaigns against the [Unification Church](#) prevailing in [Japan](#)." The statement pointed specifically to "a group called the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales," claiming it was established in [Japan](#) in 1987 to "combat the

[Unification Church](#), although it occasionally targeted other religious movements as well."

The CAP-LC claims the network has a history defending individuals who've engaged in violent "deprogramming" operations, which are "forbidden in most democratic countries." In the past, the operations have included kidnapping of [Unification Church](#) members for the purpose of "de-converting" them, the [Paris](#)-based group wrote.

The Japanese Consumer Affairs Agency's probe into [FFWPU](#) activities is specifically examining the issue of so-called "spiritual sales," through which the [Unification Church](#) has been accused of raising funds by selling objects like vases and miniature pagodas at inflated prices.

The CAP-LC statement to the [U.N. Human Rights Committee](#) asserted that the term "spiritual sales" was "coined by anti-Unification-Church leftist media in [Japan](#) in the 1980s."