

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: When Media Hate Narratives Become State Repression

Knut Holdhus
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Alarmist media narratives leading to state repression in South Korea and Japan. Illustration: ChatGPT

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

How alarmist narratives circulated uncritically by media for years led to Japan's and South Korea's expanding control over minority religions

The relationship between media narratives and state power has become increasingly significant in contemporary debates about religious freedom and social control. In societies marked by rapid information circulation, emotionally charged reporting, and public anxieties surrounding "dangerous groups", media discourse does not merely reflect public sentiment; it actively shapes the legal and political frameworks through which minority religions are understood and governed. One of the most

consequential mechanisms within this process is guilt by association: the transformation of accusations directed at leaders, members, or isolated incidents into a generalized condemnation of an entire religious community. Once this mechanism becomes normalized in public discourse, it can move beyond stigma and produce concrete institutional effects.

Maria Vardé

Recent developments in Japan and South Korea demonstrate how narratives originally constructed through media framing and "anti-cult" rhetoric can evolve into direct state intervention against religious minorities. In both countries, public controversies involving religious organizations have generated conditions in which legal categories, administrative procedures, and political discourse increasingly treat certain religious groups not as communities protected by freedom of religion, but as social threats requiring supervision, restriction, or elimination. These developments reveal how modern democratic states may absorb and formalize media-generated suspicions into law and public policy.

Maria Vardé's article, "[Beyond the Leader. 2. The Legal Effects of Guilt by Association](#)", published in [Bitter Winter](#) on 14th May 2026, explores this transition from cultural stigma to institutional consequence. The [article](#) argues that media narratives do not simply influence how the public perceives minority religions; they may also create the emotional and political atmosphere necessary for

governments to justify extraordinary legal measures. Through examples from Japan, South Korea, and Argentina, Vardé traces how accusations associated with individuals can be expanded into narratives depicting entire religious organizations as inherently manipulative, fraudulent, or dangerous.

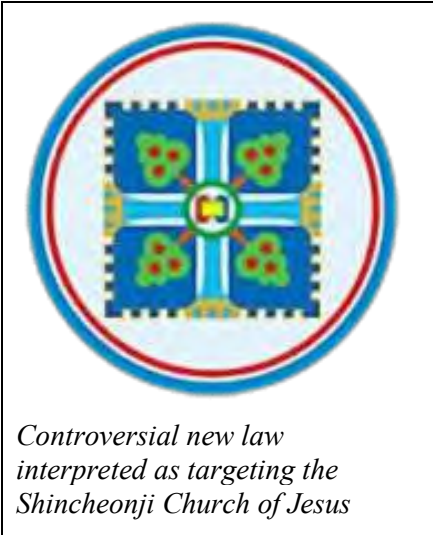


The Japanese case following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) in July 2022 provides one of the clearest illustrations of this dynamic. The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), explained that he held deep resentment toward the [Unification Church](#) - in Japan, since 2015 the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - because his mother had allegedly made excessive donations to the movement years earlier. Abe himself was targeted because of his public connections to organizations linked to the [Family Federation](#). However, according to Vardé, the media and "anti-cult" commentators gradually reframed the event in a way that shifted moral responsibility away from the assassin and onto the [religious organization](#) itself.

Within this narrative transformation, Yamagami increasingly appeared in public discourse not primarily as the perpetrator of political violence, but as a victim shaped by the [religious group](#)'s influence. Simultaneously, the [Federation](#) came to be represented as the deeper cause of the assassination. This reframing had consequences extending far beyond media commentary. It contributed to a political climate in which Japanese authorities altered the interpretation of laws governing religious corporations.

Historically, the dissolution of religious organizations in Japan had generally required evidence of criminal conduct. Yet after Abe's assassination and the extensive public campaign against the [Family Federation](#), earlier civil disputes concerning donations were reinterpreted as sufficient grounds for requesting dissolution. Courts accepted this expanded interpretation, thereby lowering the threshold for state intervention against a religious body.

Vardé emphasizes that this process depended heavily on anti-cult concepts such as "brainwashing" and "mind control" [See editor's note 1 below]. Under this framework, the religious teachings and practices of the [faith minority](#) were no longer viewed as expressions of faith or spiritual discipline, but as mechanisms designed to [manipulate](#) followers financially and psychologically. The voluntary actions of believers - particularly donations - were recast as inherently invalid because members were presumed incapable of exercising genuine free will.



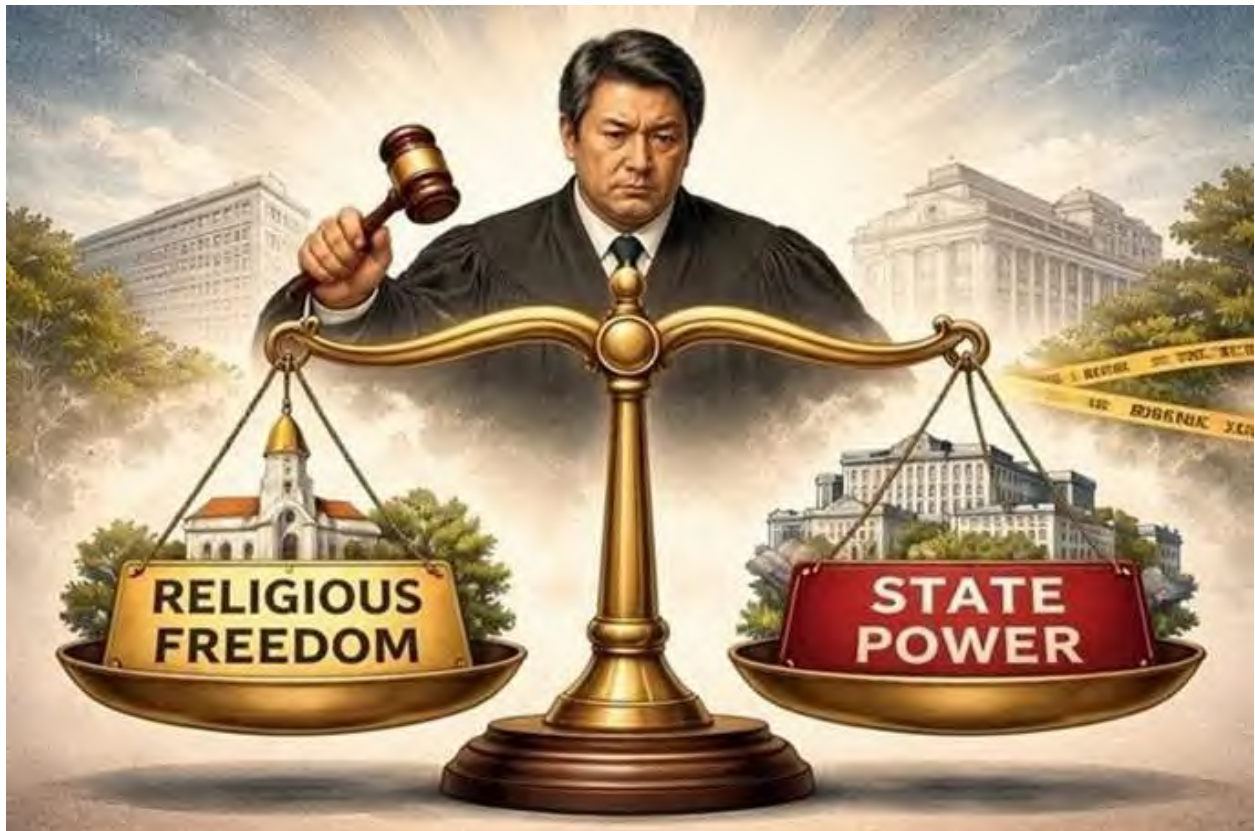
This narrative produced a powerful legal implication: if followers were assumed to be permanently [manipulated](#), then even the absence of complaints could be interpreted as evidence of continued control. The [organization](#) itself therefore came to be portrayed not merely as controversial, but as structurally deceptive and socially harmful. According to the article, the practical consequences were immediate and severe. Religious

facilities were [closed](#), assets were transferred to [liquidators](#), and the ordinary religious lives of believers were disrupted while the organization faced potential dissolution.

South Korea presents a related but distinct development. There, guilt by association has also expanded from media discourse into legislative initiatives. The article discusses the case involving [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - also called [Mother Han](#) - co-founder and leader of the [Family Federation](#), who became embroiled in allegations concerning political bribery connected to associates and public officials. Although she denied knowledge or involvement, the controversy intensified broader political efforts to increase state oversight of religious organizations.

In early 2026, the left-leaning Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration of South Korea introduced legislation commonly referred to as the "Church Dissolution Act". Although framed in neutral legal language, the political discourse surrounding the bill reportedly made clear that organizations such as the

[Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below] were among its primary targets. The proposed law would authorize extensive state powers, including compulsory inspections, interrogation of religious leaders, revocation of legal status, dissolution of organizations, and state control over assets.



The current Lee Jae-myung administration is trying to introduce a vague new law that would give the state powers to arbitrarily dissolve religious organizations, effectively violating the country's constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom. Illustration: ChatGPT

Unlike the Japanese case, which emerged from a specific national trauma tied to Abe's assassination, the South Korean proposal appears to institutionalize a broader mechanism of state supervision over religions considered socially or politically problematic. Vardé argues that this marks a significant shift. The issue is no longer limited to responding to a singular controversy; rather, the state acquires a generalized framework for regulating or potentially eliminating religious groups perceived as undesirable.

A central concern raised throughout the [article](#) is that these policies are often justified through language that appears reasonable and protective. Governments and media actors invoke concepts such as victim protection, public safety, social order, or national security. Yet beneath this reassuring vocabulary lies a deeper transformation: as Vardé points out, actions attributed to specific individuals becomes generalized across entire communities.

In this sense, guilt by association becomes more than a social prejudice. It evolves into an administrative and legal principle capable of restructuring the boundaries of religious freedom. Once suspicion is embedded into institutional procedures, religious belonging itself may acquire legal significance. Minority faiths become vulnerable not because of demonstrable criminal conduct by all members, but because narratives surrounding leaders, associates, or isolated incidents allow the state to treat the entire organization as inherently suspect.

The experiences of Japan and South Korea therefore illustrate a broader contemporary problem: the convergence of media sensationalism, "anti-cult" discourse, and expanding state authority. Vardé's analysis suggests that when emotionally charged narratives dominate public debate, democratic institutions may gradually normalize exceptional measures against unpopular religions. What begins as media framing can ultimately reshape legal doctrine, administrative practice, and the lived reality of religious communities.

By examining these developments, the [article](#) raises important questions about the fragility of religious liberty in modern societies. It invites reflection on how democratic states balance public concern with the protection of minority rights, and how quickly narratives of suspicion can become embedded in systems of governance. Most importantly, it warns that when guilt by association is accepted as a legitimate framework for public policy, the transition from social stigma to institutional repression may occur with surprising ease.

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[Editor's note 1: 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.]

[Editor's note 2: Shincheonji, officially known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation. Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it.]

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Family Federation Secures 2 ISO Certifications

May 14, 2026 • Knut Holdhus



Family Federation becomes
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When
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to obtain certification for two internationally recognized management standards

TheReport

The logo of the South Korean online newspaper The Report

On 14th May 2026, reporter Shin Dong-rip (신동립) of the South Korean online newspaper *The Report* (더리포트) published an [article](#) announcing that the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification*, in Korea often referred to as [Unificationism](#) (통일교), had become the first religious organization in South Korea to obtain integrated certification for two internationally recognized management standards: ISO 37001 and ISO 37301. The development was presented by the [religious organization](#) as a significant milestone in its effort to strengthen transparency, institutional accountability, and public trust at a time when religious organizations in South Korea are increasingly expected to demonstrate high standards of governance and ethical conduct.

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The certifications were awarded for two related but distinct management systems. ISO 37001 is the international standard for anti-bribery management systems. Developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), it provides organizations with a framework to prevent, detect, and address bribery and corruption risks. The standard requires the establishment of internal controls, risk assessments, reporting procedures, compliance oversight, and staff education designed to reduce the possibility of unethical financial or administrative practices. It has been adopted by corporations, public institutions, and non-profit organizations in many countries as part of broader compliance and governance reforms.



Song Yong-cheon (송용천) addressing the formal [Family Federation](#) meeting on 14th May 2026 to commemorate the awarding of the integrated certification. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

ISO 37301, meanwhile, concerns compliance management systems. It focuses on ensuring that organizations operate according to applicable laws, regulations, ethical obligations, and internal policies. The standard emphasizes the creation of a systematic compliance culture supported by leadership

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compliance culture supported by leadership accountability, continuous monitoring, employee training, and organizational self-assessment. Together, ISO 37001 and ISO 37301 are often viewed as complementary frameworks because both seek to institutionalize integrity, transparency, and responsible governance practices.



Song Yong-cheon (송용천), here on 1st February 2026.
Photo: [FFWPU](#)

According to the [article](#), the [Family Federation](#) held a formal ceremony on 14th May to commemorate the awarding of the integrated certification. Song Yong-cheon (송용천), head of the [religious organization](#)'s Korean branch, described the achievement as an important turning point for the [religious community](#). He stated that becoming the first

religious body in the country to receive the combined certification reflected the [Family Federation](#)'s intention to meet growing social expectations and evolve into a more transparent institution. He also emphasized the [organization](#)'s commitment to establishing a strong culture of legal and ethical compliance in order to earn greater confidence from society.

The [report](#) explained that the certification process involved several stages, including organizational analysis, system design and development, staff training, competency evaluations, implementation of management procedures, and formal inspection and auditing. Through these measures, the [organization](#) strengthened its internal control mechanisms and established systems aimed at identifying and preventing potential risks within its operations.

The [article](#) further connected the certification to an [earlier initiative](#) launched in January 2026, titled the "Declaration Ceremony for Compliance Practices to Restore Social Trust." During that [event](#), approximately 300 pastors and officials associated with the [organization](#) publicly pledged adherence to legal and ethical standards. The integrated ISO certification was presented as a concrete outcome of those commitments and as part of a wider effort to align the [organization](#)'s governance practices with internationally recognized standards.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: From the formal [Family Federation](#) meeting on 14th May 2026 to commemorate the awarding of the integrated certification. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

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Beyond the Leader. 2. The Legal Effects of Guilt by Association

by Maria Vardé | May 14, 2026 | [Featured Global](#)

In addition to ready-made stories for sale, the media can also produce scripts for more aggressive forms of state control.

by María Vardé

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



Unification Church members protesting for religious liberty in Hiroshima, Japan, in 2024.

The first article in this series examined how media narratives can transform accusations against leaders or prominent members into a totalizing image of the group as a whole. This second article follows that process into the realm of state action, where the same mechanism may influence not only public opinion but also the legal and political treatment of religious minorities.

A particularly clear example can be found in Japan, after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July 2022. The perpetrator, Tetsuya Yamagami, [stated](#) that he hated the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) because his mother had made excessive donations to it many years earlier, and that he targeted Abe because of the former prime minister's public proximity to organizations connected with the movement. In the months that followed, however, media outlets and anti-cult discourses reshaped the public meaning of the crime. Yamagami was increasingly presented as a victim of the Church, while the Church itself became the true moral agent responsible for the assassination.

That reversal was not merely rhetorical. It created the political and emotional climate in which the Japanese government changed its interpretation of the law governing religious corporations. As attorney [Patricia Duval has analyzed](#), the law had traditionally been understood as allowing dissolution only in cases involving proven criminal offenses. After Abe's assassination and the intense public campaign that followed, however, past civil litigation concerning donations came to be treated as sufficient grounds to request the dissolution of the Unification Church. The Tokyo District Court and, later, the Tokyo High Court accepted this new interpretation.

Under that frame, Abe's assassination, earlier civil disputes, and anti-cult interpretations of the Church's beliefs merged into a problematic public and legal narrative. That narrative did not simply identify wrongful conduct committed by specific individuals. It reconstructed the Church as an organization whose proselytizing, donation practices, and doctrinal formation were [allegedly based on "brainwashing" or "mind control."](#) From that perspective, religious education aimed at salvation within the Church was read not as part of the believers' spiritual life, but as a mechanism designed to extract money. The expressed will of members who had donated was disregarded on the assumption that they had not acted freely, and even the absence of new complaints was explained by claiming that the faithful remained too influenced to recognize their own harm.

This reasoning transformed the Church into a [structurally fraudulent and socially harmful entity](#). Although an appeal to the Supreme Court remains pending, the immediate consequences were severe. Places of worship were closed, assets and bank accounts were transferred to a liquidator, and the religious life of ordinary believers was directly affected by a process that treated the organization itself as extinguishable.

Mother Hak Ja Han Moon, leader of the Unification Church, was incarcerated in connection with allegations that one of her associates had given bribes to

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connection with allegations that one of her associates had given bribes to politicians and to the former president's wife. She maintains that this happened without her knowledge or consent. The controversy then moved toward a broader political initiative. In early 2026, a bill publicly known as the "[Church Dissolution Act](#)" was introduced in the National Assembly. The proposal would allow the state to inspect religious organizations compulsorily, interrogate their leaders, revoke their legal status, dissolve them, and absorb their assets.



Mother Hak Ja Han Moon.

Although the text of the bill was framed in general terms, the political discourse around it made clear which groups were being targeted. The Unification Church and Shincheonji appeared as the immediate examples of movements requiring extraordinary supervision. The measure was presented as a response to alleged political interference by religious groups, but its language was broad enough to potentially affect any religion regarded as politically problematic. In this context, anti-cult discourse converges with a rhetoric of state protection against religious influence, producing a legal vocabulary in which some movements are treated less as communities of believers than as risks to be managed.

The Korean case is important because it extends a process already visible in Japan. Whereas the Japanese dissolution followed a specific public crisis triggered by Abe's assassination and by a long-standing campaign against the Unification Church, the Korean bill appears as a general instrument of state power over religious organizations. Its objective is not to respond to a particular controversy, but to create a mechanism through which the state may supervise, suspend, or eliminate religious bodies whose activities are interpreted as socially or politically dangerous.

A different but related problem can be observed in Argentina, where anti-trafficking law has intersected with anti-cult repertoires in cases involving religious or spiritual minorities. In these cases, notions such as psychological manipulation, coercive organization, spiritual dependence, and sexual or labor exploitation may be combined in ways that make religious belonging itself part of the suspicious structure. The legal category is human trafficking, but the narrative through which the case is publicly and institutionally organized may come from the older anti-cult imagination of the manipulative leader, the captive follower, and the hidden network.

The case of Konstantin Rudnev illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. The earlier media construction of Ashram Shambhala became crucial when Rudnev was arrested in Argentina in 2025 and formally charged in a human trafficking case. The Argentine case did not arise from the initial discovery of an organized criminal network, but from suspicions activated in a hospital and migration context and then rapidly reframed as a case involving a "Russian cult," despite the alleged victim's denial that she was a victim. At the formalization of charges hearing, prosecutors began by reading Montenegrin headlines, themselves largely copied from Russian sources, and then suggested that Rudnev was organizing a network in Argentina. In this way, the case was [framed from the outset](#) as an "international criminal organization," before the prosecution had analyzed the evidence. According to what prosecutors admitted at the last hearing held on April in Bariloche, that analysis had still not been carried out.



Rudnev had already been represented for years in Russia as the leader of a criminal “cult,” after a trial that serious observers have described as based on false accusations and inseparable from the broader Russian pattern of [fabricating or amplifying accusations against dissidents and religious minorities](#). Once that image traveled through Russian and Montenegrin press materials, it became available as a ready-made explanation in Argentina. Before the local evidence had been fully examined, the figure of the “Russian cult” offered a narrative structure capable of linking hospital suspicions, migration status, foreign women, spiritual background, and trafficking law into one apparently coherent—but evidentially fragile—case.

The Japanese, Korean, and Argentine situations are not identical. Yet these scenarios are connected by the same movement from public suspicion to institutional consequence. Once this passage occurs, guilt by association no longer operates only as a cultural stigma; it becomes embedded in procedures, legal categories, and administrative decisions. This is the point at which guilt by association reaches its most consequential form. The label does not merely damage reputation, although it does that as well. It creates the conditions under which belonging to a stigmatized group can acquire legal significance.

In this sense, guilt by association functions as a mechanism of social control over religious diversity. Its effectiveness lies in the fact that it rarely appears as discrimination. It is more often expressed through languages that sound legitimate and reassuring, such as protection of victims, public good, legal rationality, social order, or national security. Yet when those languages allow the alleged responsibility of individuals to be projected onto entire communities, they transform stigma into structure. What began as a media narrative can then become a legal fact, and what began as suspicion can end in the restriction, supervision, or dissolution of religious life itself.

[Anti-Cult](#), [Brainwashing](#), [Religious Liberty](#)



Maria Vardé

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