

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan Urged To Make U-Turn

Knut Holdhus
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Left: Sam Brownback in 2015 - right: Katrina Lantos Swett in 2017

Important principles of human rights and religious freedom at risk as Japan is urged to do a U-turn



Taro Kono, government minister who brought extreme leftwing lawyer Masaki Kito, who is hostile to the [Family Federation](#), in as special advisor to the Kishida government



Activist leftwing lawyer Masaki Kito from National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, an organisation hostile to the [Family Federation](#)

14 important leaders of organisations championing human rights and religious freedom issued 29th October an urgent [statement](#) where they protest the recent attempt by elements within the Japanese government to pass legislation that would immediately freeze the assets of the [Family Federation](#) of Japan and appoint a trustee to manage them. Such legislation would make it virtually impossible for the [Family Federation](#) to defend itself well in the ongoing legal battle that has just commenced, where the [Family Federation](#) is fighting the Japanese government's request to the courts to have the minority religious organization dissolved.

The 14 leaders point out in the [statement](#), which was published on [Bitter Winter](#) 31st October 2023,

"It seems that, rather than protecting the alleged victims, the measure is aimed at putting the [Family Federation](#) immediately out of business in Japan and preventing it from organizing an effective defense against the liquidation suit by depriving it of the necessary resources. It also proves that the claim that the [Family Federation](#), once dissolved, will continue to enjoy religious liberty and will 'only' be deprived of its tax-exempt status as a religious corporation is false. In fact, the request to freeze the assets and appoint a trustee shows that the real intent of the opponents is to prevent the [Family Federation](#) from continuing its normal activities in Japan."

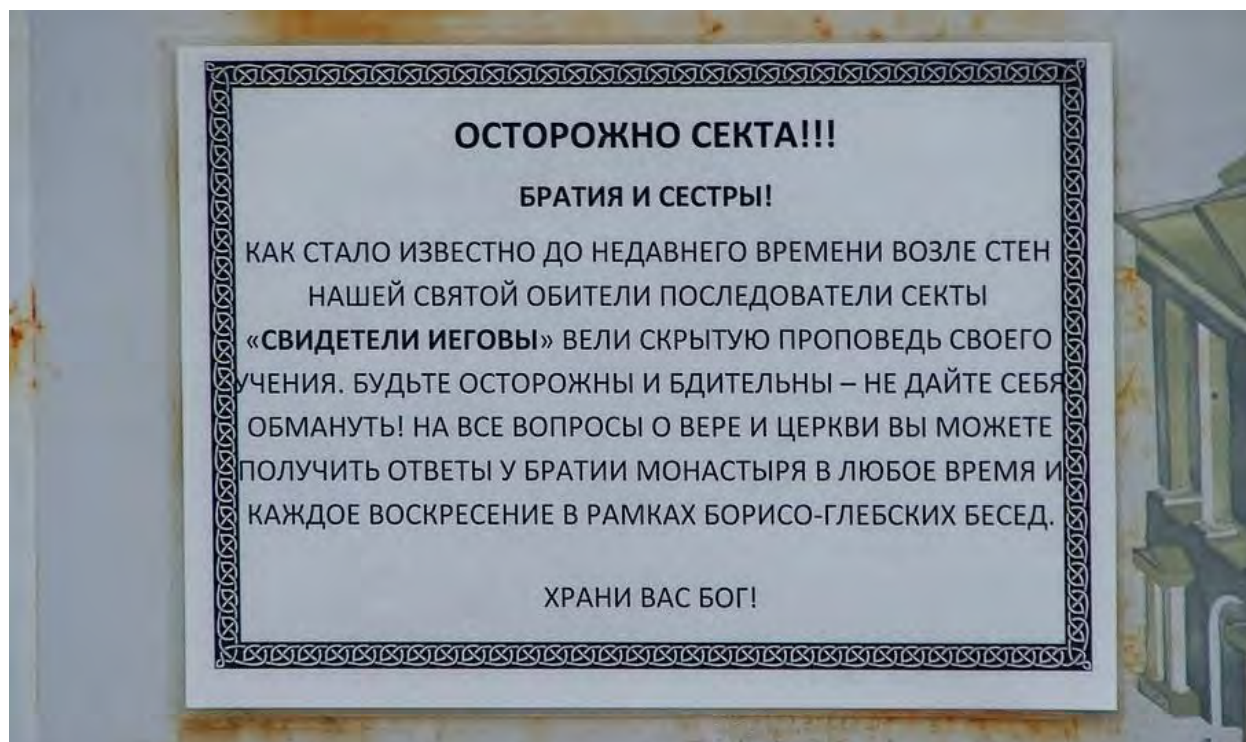
The protest from the 14 emphasize that freezing the assets of the [Family Federation](#) and liquidating it would set a dangerous precedent for the authorities to introduce similar steps against many other religious movements that certain political groups or anti-religious lawyers are opposed to. Already groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses have been mentioned in this context.

The champions of religious freedom and human rights make it clear that they see the attack on the [Family Federation](#) as part of a larger campaign against religion generally,

"Scholars have studied how campaigns against religion start by targeting comparatively small and unpopular groups. Measures against them are supported by the media and applauded by public

opinion (whose ideas about these groups are, of course, largely shaped by the same media). However, these measures become precedents and establish general principles soon applied against dozens of other

religions."



A public warning against the Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Torzhok in Tver Oblast, Russia in 2012. The headline says "Caution, sect!!!" The text goes on to say, "Brothers and sisters! As became known recently, near the walls of our holy monastery, followers of the sect Jehovah's Witnesses secretly preach their teachings. Be careful and vigilant! Don't let yourself be fooled! You can get answers to all questions about faith and the Church from the brotherhood of the monastery at any time and every Sunday within the framework of Boris-Glebsk conversations."

There are examples of such campaigns in states like Russia and China. The Jehovah's Witnesses were targeted at an early stage there, but little by little oppressive measures were introduced against other faiths. In the urgent [appeal](#) by the 14 leaders they state,

"[...] our experience demonstrates that ideologies that are in power in these regimes, including Communism, are often also at work in democratic countries. That the opposition to the [Unification Church](#) in Japan had one of its political roots in Communist campaigns targeting its conservative ideas and activism has been acknowledged by scholars who have studied the issue."

The urgent [statement](#) appeals to the politicians and courts of Japan to turn down the proposed law to freeze the assets of the [Family Federation](#) and to rethink the dissolution order. In addition, the 14 call on "the democratic allies of Japan and the United Nations to make their voice heard as a voice of reason, freedom of religion or belief, and human rights."

The experts on human rights and religious freedom also urge "all churches and religions that have a presence in Japan to speak out against the new asset-freezing law and the dissolution."

The 14 leaders from organisations championing human rights and religious freedom are

Sam Brownback, who served as U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom from 2018 to 2021 and is currently Co-chair of the International Religious Freedom Summit.

Katrina Lantos Swett, former chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, currently President of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice.

Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion, Co-founder and Managing Director of Center for Studies of New Religion (CESNUR).

Dr. Aaron Rhodes, Executive Director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) between 1993 and 2007, currently President of Forum for Religious Freedom of Europe (FOREF).

Willy Fautré, Co-founder and Director, HRWF - Human Rights Without Frontiers.

Marco Respinti, Director-in-charge, "Bitter Winter," a daily magazine on freedom of religion and human rights.

Thierry Valle, President, CAP-LC - Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience.

Eric Roux, Chairman, EIFRF - European Inter-Religious Forum for Religious Freedom.

Francesco Curto, Co-founder, Fedinsieme [Faiths Together].

Alessandro Amicarelli, President, FOB - European Federation for Freedom of Belief.

Hans Noot, Director, Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Raffaella Di Marzio, Managing Director, LIREC - Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief, and Conscience.

Rosita Šorytė, President, ORLIR - International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees.

Camelia Marin, Deputy Director, Soteria International.

"Japan Urged to Make U-turn" - text: Knut Holdhus

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BITTER WINTER

A MAGAZINE ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Proposed Freezing of Assets of Religious Corporations the Government Seeks to Dissolve: A Danger for All Faiths in Japan

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The proposed law immediately targets the Unification Church, based on controversial data about "victims" and "damages," but establishes an unfair general principle with ominous implications for the future.



Japan's Parliament, the National Diet, where the new law proposal will be discussed. Credits.

We sign this urgent statement to express our concern about the possibility that a new law may be passed in Japan allowing the assets of religious corporations for which a request of dissolution has been filed to be "preserved" or frozen, and a trustee appointed to manage them, without even waiting for the outcome of the court dissolution case. The law targets the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, formerly known as the Unification Church, which the government is trying to dissolve as a religious corporation in Japan through a lawsuit.

We have known the Family Federation for many years and are aware of its problems in Japan. We understand that some Japanese members of the Family Federation were accused of having exerted in the past an undue pressure on other devotees, and the public in general, to make donations or purchase certain artifacts.

We are also aware that the Family Federation in Japan sincerely tried to correct past problems, with some success. Before the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the number of complaints for events that happened in the 2010s and the 2020s had significantly declined with respect to those dating back to previous decades.

We are also aware that similar problems exist among both old and new religious traditions. Almost all churches and religions have been accused in some countries or stages of their history of being excessively aggressive in asking for monetary contributions in one way or the other.

Proponents of the asset-freezing law claim that it is needed to preserve the interests of the "victims," which may otherwise never be refunded. We understand, however, that hundreds of cases have already been settled and that, notwithstanding folk statistics circulated in the media, and even without considering that some claims refer to the events that allegedly happened decades ago, the number of pending cases is comparatively limited. It is also without proportion with the scope of the proposed measure.

It seems that, rather than protecting the alleged victims, the measure is aimed at putting the Family Federation immediately out of business in Japan and preventing it from organizing an effective defense against the liquidation suit by depriving it of the necessary resources. It also proves that the claim that the Family Federation, once dissolved, will continue to enjoy religious liberty and will "only" be deprived of its tax-exempt status as a religious corporation is false. In fact, the request to freeze the assets and appoint a trustee shows that the real intent of the opponents is to prevent the Family Federation from continuing its normal activities in Japan.

Liquidating the Family Federation and freezing its assets would open the way to similar actions against dozens of other

religious movements that are not popular with the media or with some lawyers or political groups. We already hear voices in Japan accusing other religious groups and calling for similar measures against them.

Scholars have studied how campaigns against religion start by targeting comparatively small and unpopular groups. Measures against them are supported by the media and applauded by public opinion (whose ideas about these groups are, of course, largely shaped by the same media). However, these measures become precedents and establish general principles soon applied against dozens of other religions.



Former U.S. Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback and Katrina Lantos Swett, who was twice the Chair of the United States International Commission for Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from 2009 to 2011. Both sign this appeal.

We have seen this process at work in Russia and China, which both started targeting the Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other religions regarded as "anti-social," but gradually extended their repression to all religionists the regimes saw as potential dissidents.

We have certainly no intention of comparing Japan and its beautiful democracy to these totalitarian and oppressive regimes. However, our experience demonstrates that ideologies that are in power in these regimes, including Communism, are often also at work in democratic countries. That the opposition to the Unification Church in Japan had one of its political roots in Communist campaigns targeting its conservative ideas and activism has been acknowledged by scholars who have studied the issue.

We call on Japanese politicians and courts to reject the proposed law allowing the assets of religious corporations against which a dissolution lawsuit has been filed to be frozen, and to reconsider the dissolution request, acknowledging the dangerous far-reaching implications of these measures and the permanent stains they would create on the international image of Japan as a democratic country respectful of human rights.

We call on the democratic allies of Japan and the United Nations to make their voice heard as a voice of reason, freedom of religion or belief, and human rights.

We call on all churches and religions that have a presence in Japan to speak out against the new asset-freezing law and the dissolution. No matter how much they can disagree with the Family Federation on many subjects, the new law and a precedent allowing for dissolution of religious organizations that only lost civil as opposed to criminal cases would threaten them as well.

Remaining silent hoping to be spared by campaigns whose final aim is to impose severe limitations affecting all religions would place them in the position of the average timid German clergyman during the Nazi years, captured in the famous poem by Lutheran pastor and dissident Martin Niemöller. "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

October 29, 2023

Marco Respinti, Director-in-charge, "Bitter Winter," a daily magazine on freedom of religion and human rights

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Ambassador Sam Brownback, Co-Chair, International Religious Freedom Summit

Katrina Lantos Swett, Co-Chair, International Religious Freedom Summit

Raffaella Di Marzio, Managing Director, LIREC – Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief, and Conscience

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Camelia Marin, Deputy Director, Soteria International

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Arnost Libezny, The Universal Archconfraternity of Papal Knights, Dames, and Esquires



TAGGED WITH: ANTI-CULT JAPAN, RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, UNIFICATION CHURCH



Bitter Winter

Bitter Winter reports on how religions are allowed, or not allowed, to operate in China and how some are severely persecuted after they are labeled as "xie jiao," or heterodox teachings. We publish news difficult to find elsewhere, analyses, and debates.

Placed under the editorship of Massimo Introvigne, one of the most well-known scholars of religion internationally, "Bitter Winter" is a cooperative enterprise by scholars, human rights activists, and members of religious organizations persecuted in China (some of them have elected, for obvious reasons, to remain

anonymous).

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