

**FFWPU Europe - Middle East: Peter Zoehrer on S Korea and Japan's Persecution of Religions**

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Peter Zoehrer, journalist and Executive Director, [FOREF Europe](#) ([Forum for Religious Freedom Europe](#)), speaking July 4, 2025 in Vienna, Austria



CESNUR Conference 2025 poster

**A wake-up call to the free world:  
International solidarity needed against  
rising use of authoritarian tactics in  
democratic states against vulnerable  
minority faiths**

**A Dangerous Precedent: Japan's Assault on  
Religious Freedom and Its Global Fallout - 2**

Part 2 of an address by Peter Zoehrer, journalist and Executive Director, [FOREF Europe](#) ([Forum for Religious Freedom Europe](#)), given at the plenary session on day one, 18th November 2025, of the CESNUR 25 Conference at the CTICC-1 (Cape Town International Convention Center 1) in Cape Town, South Africa. [CESNUR](#) is short for [Center for Studies on New Religions](#), an international network of associations of scholars working in the field of new religious movements. The conference was co-organized by CESNUR, African Hidden Voices, African

Forum for Religious and Spirituality Liberty (AFRSL), and International Society for the Study of New Religions.



See part 1: [Warning Signal from Japan: Dangerous Precedent](#)

See also [Lobbying Probe Risks Becoming a Witch Hunt](#)

**Silencing the World: Deaf Ears to Global Appeals**

This is not simply a Japanese domestic issue. A broad coalition of academics, constitutional scholars, ForB experts, former UN officials and civil-society networks have formally and publicly appealed to Japan to pause and reconsider its path. These appeals have taken the form of open letters, legal analyses,

human-rights briefs and international pressure. Yet Tokyo has largely remained unmoved.

 <i>UN Special Rapporteur: Farida Shaheed (2016)</i>	 <i>UN Special Rapporteur: Nina Romero</i>	 <i>UN Special Rapporteur: Nicolas Levrat</i>	 <i>UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom: Nazila Ghanea</i>
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Through the UN Special Rapporteur [See editor's note below] on freedom of religion or belief at the Human Rights Council, Nazila Ghanea, the UN should be able to lead dialogue with Japan.

On 1st October 2025, four United Nations Special Rapporteurs [See editor's

note 1 below] issued a [joint statement](#) from Geneva expressing "serious concern over Japan's continued stigmatization of religious minorities." The experts are: Nazila Ghanea - Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Nicolas Levrat - Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Gina Romero - Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; and Farida Shaheed - Special Rapporteur on the right to education. ([OHCHR](#))



Their concerns included discriminatory school-materials that portray religion as potential child-abuse, the misuse of the "public welfare" doctrine to justify broad restrictions, and the risk that religious minorities are penalised under vague legal standards. Japan was urged to revise its Q and A Guidelines, to cooperate fully with UN mechanisms, and to restore institutional equality for religious organisations under the law. ([Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan](#))

When a democracy ignores international counsel, suppresses domestic dissent, and moves to dissolve a faith-organisation under administrative pretexts, we must ask: which model of democracy is in play?

**Real-World Consequences: The Human Cost**

Law and policy matter - but they are not just abstract; they affect real people. In Japan, following the dissolution request and the campaign against the [Unification Church](#) [See editor's note 2 below], members report:

Bullying, exclusion and stigma in schools and universities due to religious affiliation.

Frozen bank accounts, [denial of rental services](#) (cars, apartments, event-spaces) once affiliation is disclosed.



Job interviews cancelled, job offers rescinded when the affiliation became known.

Social ostracism, exclusion from inter-faith networks or public-forum engagement.

In some cases, depression and even [suicide](#) among individuals feeling isolated, stigmatised and abandoned. ([bitterwinter.org](#))

Now let us widen the lens to include South Korea. On 22nd September 2025, the leader of the global Unification Movement, Dr [Hak Ja Han](#) - age 82 - was reportedly [detained](#) by South-Korean investigators in a case involving [alleged bribery](#) tied to the wife of former President Yoon Suk-yeol and senior lawmakers.

What is striking is that the detention came while she was medically vulnerable: she had recently undergone heart surgery in early September 2025 and is reported to suffer from impaired eyesight and diabetes. Her detention in the context of fragile health is not a mere legal act - it is a warning. It signals that leadership of a minority

faith can be targeted, not just membership. When affiliation or leadership becomes a liability, freedom is at risk.

### CCP Endorsement: A Chilling Signal

The situation becomes even more worrying when authoritarian regimes applaud these democratic actions. The Chinese-Communist-Party-linked tabloid Global Times [hailed Japan's dissolution](#) of the [Unification Church](#) [See editor's note 2 below] as a "positive example" and called on other nations to follow suit.

The irony is profound. The same regime is actively engaged in the mass internment of Uyghur Muslims, suppression of underground churches, banning the Falun Gong movement and controlling religious life in Tibet and elsewhere. That a dictatorship would cheer a democratic country's suppression of a religious organisation should send alarm throughout all free societies. If authoritarian regimes applaud such moves, then we must recognize we may be sliding not into overt repression, but into a new form of state-approved religion or state-controlled belief.

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To be continued. Part 3 coming soon.

See part 1: [Warning Signal from Japan: Dangerous Precedent](#)

See also [Lobbying Probe Risks Becoming a Witch Hunt](#)

**[Editor's note 1:** A Special Rapporteur (or Independent Expert) is an independent human rights expert appointed by the United Nations (UN) to provide reports or advice on human rights issues from either a thematic or country-specific perspective. These experts are selected by the UN Human Rights Council and operate independently of any government, playing a crucial role in monitoring the actions of sovereign nations and democratically elected governments.

Special Rapporteurs do not receive financial compensation from the United Nations for their work. However, they receive support from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and are often funded by charities and corporations. Annually, they convene in Geneva to discuss common issues, coordinate their efforts, and engage with various stakeholders, including states and civil society organizations.

These experts frequently conduct fact-finding missions to investigate human rights violation allegations in different countries. In addition to these missions, they regularly review complaints from alleged victims of human rights abuses. If a complaint is verified, they send an urgent letter or appeal to the concerned government. Even without a specific complaint, Special Rapporteurs can intervene on behalf of individuals or groups at their discretion.]

**[Editor's note 2:** Although Peter Zoehrer uses the name "Unification Church" and also the word "church", please be aware that the [Unification Church](#) in Japan in 2015 changed its name to [Family Federation for World peace and Unification](#).]

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speaking at the opening ceremony, it is a great privilege to join you here in Cape Town among such distinguished scholars, human-rights advocates and journalists.

My name is Peter Zoehrer, and I speak today both as a journalist and as Executive Director of **FOREF Europe**, a Vienna-based human-rights NGO committed to defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as a foundational civil right.

Let me begin with two heartfelt acknowledgements: First, to Dr Imboni Samuel Radebe for his visionary step in bringing CESNUR 25 to Cape Town; and second, to Dr Massimo Introvigne and the entire **CESNUR** team for organising this outstanding conference. It is through such collaboration and foresight that we gather here today.



Dr Imboni Samuel Radebe at the CESNUR 25. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

What I present to you is more than the account of one organisation in one country. It is a global signal. We are witnessing in Japan the emergence of what may become a blueprint for religious suppression.

The unfolding events involving the organisation commonly called the **Unification Church** – officially the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (FFWPU) – have implications far beyond Tokyo’s courtrooms and the Japanese mainland. What happens in Japan may well reverberate around the world.



Shinzo Abe in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated. Photo: [United States Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel / Wikimedia Commons](#). [Public domain image](#). [Cropped](#)

**The Abe Assassination and the “Court of Public Opinion”**

The story begins with a tragic event on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2022, when former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated by Tetsuya Yamagami, who publicly blamed the **Church** for his mother’s financial distress tied to past donations. Rather than focusing solely on this as the act of a disturbed individual, the Japanese media swiftly launched what can fairly be described as a coordinated moral panic.

The **Church** became the defendant in a “court of public opinion” – not a courtroom of law. Within days, countless news articles and broadcasts cast the **Church** as a societal menace: threatening family life, undermining finances, disrupting national politics. By May 2025, approximately 30 % of registered religious corporations in Japan reported that they “felt uneasy” about their status in the wake of heightened scrutiny and public anxiety. The media-law-civil-complaint complex created what one might call a “media firewall” – a closed loop in which dissenting voices from scholars, religious-liberty experts, religious-organisation

members and international bodies were systematically excluded from the dominant narrative. Public opinion became heavily shaped – and not always by balanced information.

**The Dissolution Order: Criminalising Belief Without Conviction**

Less than a year later, in October 2023, Japan’s *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* (MEXT) formally requested the *Tokyo District Court* to dissolve the **Church**’s legal status as a religious corporation. Then, on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2025, the *Tokyo District Court* issued the [dissolution order](#): it revoked the **organisation**’s religious-corporation status, revoked its tax-exempt privileges, and ordered [liquidation](#) of its assets.

Yet crucially: this was **not** the result of a criminal conviction of the **organisation**. Instead, it relied on administrative/civil-law allegations of “social detriment” – including donations deemed coercive, purchases of expensive goods, alleged psychological pressure – without the procedural safeguards normally operative in criminal justice.



**International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**

This move undermines Japan’s obligations under Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which protects belief and the freedom to manifest religion through teaching, worship, organisation and practice.

And perhaps most importantly: the **organisation** formally

filed an appeal on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2025 with the *Tokyo High Court*. Hearings are expected to conclude in November 2025. ([Japan Times](#)) In other words: the case is still pending. The precedent is still being contested. Without due process, we risk a model in which belief and association become vulnerable to dissolution – not because of proven wrongdoing, but because of social stigma, media pressure and ambiguous legal standards.



Norishige Kondo (近藤 徳茂) – left – Deputy Director of the Legal Affairs Bureau of the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**, responds to questions from the media after filing the appeal on the morning of 7<sup>th</sup> April in Kasumigaseki, Tokyo. Photo: [Keizo Mori](#) (森啓造)

Continued in [part 2: Rising Religious Persecution in SKorea, Japan](#)

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**Featured image** above: From a plenary session of CESNUR 25 on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2025 in Cape Town, South Africa. Top left insert: Peter Zoehrer, bottom left: The official poster for CESNUR 25. Photos: [FOREF Europe](#)

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