

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: In Japan Questions Remain in Abe Murder

Knut Holdhus
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Tetsuya Yamagami given life sentence. Illustration: Chat GPT



Shinzo Abe assassination verdict raises questions about the defendant's "leap" as its cause remain unexplained

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The Background Behind the "Leap" Must Be Clarified

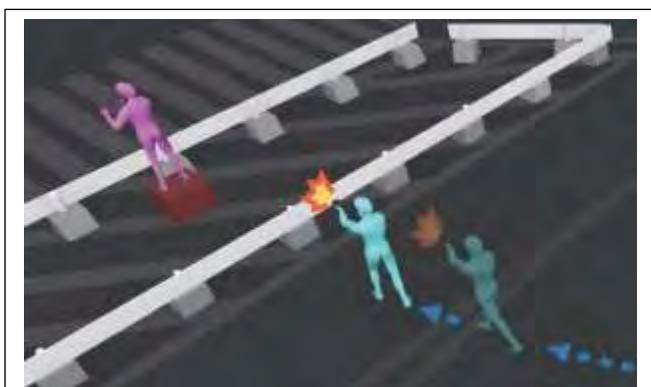
Verdict in the Assassination of Shinzo Abe

by the editorial board of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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Positional relationship between former prime minister Shinzo Abe and the shooter Tetsuya Yamagami on his assassination. Sourced from [Nikkei.com](#)

In the case in which former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) was shot and killed in July 2022 while campaigning in Nara City, the Nara District Court sentenced Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), who was charged with murder and other crimes, to life imprisonment, as sought by prosecutors.

The central point of contention was how much weight should be given in sentencing to the defendant's disadvantaged upbringing, which stemmed from his mother's involvement in the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). The court's conclusion that his upbringing "cannot be said to have had a significant impact

on the occurrence of the incident" is an appropriate judgment.

No Significant Impact of Upbringing Recognized



Shinzo Abe in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated

At the same time, the defendant's act - attacking Shinzo Abe with a homemade firearm during a campaign speech in support of a House of Councillors election - shook the very foundations of democracy. By killing Abe, whom the defendant himself described as "not the real target", he sought to shock society, provoke criticism of the [religious organization](#), and "strike back" at it. This act can be described as nothing other than terrorism. While the ruling did judge the crime as a heinous murder, it cannot be said to have fully confronted its essential nature as a terrorist act.

During the trial, the defense called the defendant's family members and scholars of religion as witnesses, arguing that the mother's conversion to the former [Unification Church](#) and her large financial donations constituted "religious abuse" of her children, and sought leniency in sentencing.

Regarding the defendant's upbringing, the court acknowledged that it had "significant disadvantaged aspects", stating,

"It is not impossible to understand that the defendant, having been deeply shaken by his brother's suicide, saw the complex emotions he harbored toward the [religious organization](#) turn into intense anger."

However, the court continued,

"There must be said to have been a major leap between that and the decision to commit murder and to plan and carry out the manufacture of a homemade firearm."

Therefore, the court concluded,

"The influence of his upbringing cannot be recognized as substantial."

As for the decision to change the target from senior [church](#) officials to Shinzo Abe, the court found,

"Ultimately, the defendant decided to carry out the attack by prioritizing his own circumstances - namely, his worsening financial situation and his belief that he could not wait any longer."

It further stated that even this "shortsighted and self-centered decision-making process cannot be regarded as having been significantly influenced by the disadvantages of his upbringing."



The scene of the assassination of Shinzo Abe in front of Yamato-Saidaiji Station in Nara City, Japan

From the outset, the incident was investigated and prosecuted as a lone-wolf crime by Yamagami. During the trial, the defense did not dispute the facts, and the defendant himself admitted them. Nevertheless, various doubts remain regarding the theory that he acted entirely alone. There is a major discrepancy between the assessment by Dr. Hidetada Fukushima (福島英賢) of Nara Medical University Hospital,

who treated Shinzo Abe and reported severe damage to the heart, and the findings of the subsequent judicial autopsy conducted by the Nara Prefectural Police. There is also information suggesting that the fatal bullet was never recovered.

See also ["Organized Terrorism, Not Lone Wolf, Killed Abe"](#)

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These are not so-called "conspiracy theories," but reasonable questions. It was hoped that they would be clarified during the trial. However, only the forensic pathologist testified, and Dr. Fukushima was not called as a witness. Rather than dispelling doubts, the proceedings can be said to have deepened them.

Target Changed Five Days Before the Incident

The defendant had originally gone so far as to incur debt in order to manufacture a homemade firearm to attack senior figures of the [religious organization](#). The decision to change the target to Abe - whom he had originally regarded as "not an enemy" - and to begin acting on that decision was made just five days before the crime.

Here, too, there was a major "leap". Was economic hardship alone truly the reason for that leap? It cannot be assumed that the defendant has told the whole truth. Clarifying the background behind this leap is essential.

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Court Rejects Media Narrative In Yamagami Case

- January 24, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



Life sentence in Shinzo Abe assassination case shatters dominant media narrative of assassin Yamagami as a victim



Tokyo, 23rd January 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. *Original article*.

Religious Harm Created by a Narrative

The Truth and Fiction of Defendant Yamagami

by Seisaku Morita (森田 清策)

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In accordance with the prosecution's demand, the court handed down a sentence of life imprisonment to Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也 – 45), the defendant in the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三). Because the brutal act of killing a globally known political figure with a homemade gun could not be directly linked to the defendant's upbringing, the court imposed the harshest punishment short of the death



Assassinated: Shinzo Abe, here in 2017. Photo: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 2.0 Gen. Cropped

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The significance of this ruling is profound for the media industry. It demonstrates a major discrepancy between the image of Yamagami that was disseminated through media coverage – portraying him as a “victim” of religious abuse who attracted not only public sympathy but even financial support – and the judgment reached by the judge and lay judges based on evidence and testimony presented in court. As a result, **the truthfulness and responsibility of media reporting are now being called into question.**

The spread of what could be described as a **“fictional image” of Yamagami was fueled by journalists’ lack of understanding of religion and by the presence of certain core anti-religion activists.** However, even without deep expertise in religious matters, it is possible to approach the reality of Yamagami himself and the true nature of the incident by sincerely engaging with objective facts.

Prior to the verdict, **two essays** that sought to examine the case more objectively – distinct from mainstream newspaper and television reporting – **appeared in monthly magazines.** These were “Courtroom Observation Notes on the Assassination of Former Prime Minister Abe,” by lawyer and journalist Hitofumi Yanai (楊井人文 – Hanada, January-February issue), and “The Deep Darkness of the Yamagami Family,” by writer Fumihiko Kato (加藤文宏 – Seiron, February issue).

Including the sentencing, the trial was held a total of 16 times. Of the 14 sessions held up to the time of writing, Yanai attended all but two, from which he was excluded due to the lottery system. He cited two reasons for doing so. First, he wanted to witness firsthand how judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and lay judges would confront, deliberate upon, and adjudicate the historic case of a former prime minister’s assassination.

The second reason was his discomfort with the widespread narrative portraying Yamagami as someone whose life was destroyed along with his family by the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Family Federation, formerly the Unification Church)**, which his mother joined and to which she made large donations. Yanai felt uneasy that public attention had shifted away from the incident itself toward “the relationship between the former **Unification Church** and politics.”



The front cover page of Monthly Hanada January 2026

What Yanai emphasized in the January issue was that the incident was a premeditated act of terrorism carried out by Yamagami. A police officer who testified in court stated that when searching Yamagami’s room, it “felt like a terrorist’s hideout,” and prosecutors explained that, in addition to the weapon used at the crime scene, six homemade pipe guns were discovered. Based on these facts alone, it can be stated unequivocally that Yamagami was a terrorist.

Meanwhile, Kato’s essay was written based on interviews with a former **church** leader, identified as Mr. A, who had supported the Yamagami family and was trusted by the defendant. Out of gratitude to Mr. A, who had shown concern especially for his older brother, Yamagami even gave him a pair of sneakers as a gift. The essay also revealed that the decision by the **religious organization** to refund 50 million yen of the 100 million yen donated by Yamagami’s mother was agreed upon by all three siblings, including Yamagami himself.

The media reported as though the Yamagami family collapsed solely because the mother adhered to the **Family Federation’s** faith. However, when Yanai’s February article and Kato’s essay are considered together, a different reality emerges: prior to the mother’s religious involvement, the family had already suffered severe hardships, including the father’s suicide and the eldest brother’s illness. It was likely that the mother sought salvation from these misfortunes.

“The mother did not force her faith on her children,” Kato writes. The notion that Yamagami had been a victim of religious abuse from early childhood can thus be seen as a narrative constructed on the basis of prejudice against religion.

That said, this does not mean the **Family Federation** was entirely unrelated to the family’s hardship. Mr. A explained that the mother attended a **church** originally intended for Korean members, which often resulted in a lack of understanding of Japanese culture and family norms – factors that contributed to the large donations. Nevertheless, this was not a direct cause of the terrorist act.

By intentionally focusing media coverage on Yamagami’s motives, the violent act itself was rendered ambiguous as an act of terrorism. Furthermore, **issues involving the religious organization, which were at most a remote contributing factor, were substituted as the primary cause, resulting in a reversal whereby the perpetrator was cast as a victim and the victims as perpetrators.** However, the life sentence handed down makes clear that the facts established in court were far removed from the **narrative spread through biased reporting.** Going forward, the question society must confront is whether it can accept that reality.

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Featured image shows The Yamagami family and the false media narrative.

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Fumihiko Kato (加藤文宏) delivering a lecture 14th Dec. 2024 in Ichikawa City, Chiba Prefecture. Photo: Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田剛).



The front cover page of Seiron February 2026 issue.

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