

## FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: FFWPU Dissolution Case - Courts Must Not Reward Terrorist

Knut Holdhus  
February 1, 2026



Courts must not reward terror. Illustration: ChatGPT



**Yamagami's life sentence closes the criminal case, but dissolution efforts backed by courts risk validating the very objectives of his terrorism**

Tokyo, 30th January 2026 - Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

**Judicial Integrity That Must Not "Reward" Terrorism**

**The "Yamagami Terror Attack" and the Dissolution of a Religious Organization**

by Seisaku Morita (森田 清策)

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Nara District Court (2007)

The Nara District Court has [sentenced](#) defendant Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也) to life imprisonment. By imposing the harshest penalty short of the death sentence, the court effectively recognized that the shooting of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) was a premeditated act of terrorism. Although an appeal remains possible, the [first-instance judgment](#) brings a provisional conclusion to the criminal acts committed by the defendant.

While the [sentencing](#) itself can be regarded as appropriate, it is regrettable that the ruling did not delve into the political and social impact brought about by the terrorist act. That remains the unresolved issue. Only by drawing lessons from a terrorist attack that claimed the life of the politician who served the longest tenure as prime minister in Japan's constitutional history can recurrence be prevented - and such reflection would serve as the bare minimum form of

requiem for Shinzo Abe.

When considering the societal problems caused by the "Yamagami terror attack", the key point lies in the defendant's objective in attempting to take Abe's life. According to the judgment, Yamagami harbored resentment toward the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), believing that his life had been ruined by his mother's faith and her large financial donations to the [organization](#).



*Paid the ultimate price: Shinzo Abe, here delivering a video message on September 12, 2021*

Seeking to "strike back" at the [group](#), he shot Abe, who had sent a video message to an event hosted by an organization affiliated with the [Federation](#). The defendant believed that doing so would focus public criticism on the [religious organization](#).

One particularly conspicuous development triggered by the terror attack was the move to seek a dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#). In March of last year, the Tokyo District Court issued a [decision](#) ordering the dissolution of the [organization](#) under the Religious Corporations Act. The [organization](#)

immediately filed an interlocutory [appeal](#) [Editor's note: an appeal filed before a case has reached a final judgment, challenging a specific interim ruling made by a lower court]. The Tokyo High Court is expected to issue its decision within the current fiscal year [Editor's note: which ends on 31st March].

In the context of terrorism, the question of what a court-issued dissolution order signifies is crucial: it would amount to the judiciary condoning a disregard for due process - the core of the rule of law. Since due process is a constitutional principle, its violation is a matter of grave concern.



*Former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida swayed by hostile media campaign and [changed the law overnight](#) April 16, 2023*

The trigger for the dissolution request process was pulled by then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (岸田文雄), who was in office at the time of the attack. Immediately after the incident, the media launched intense criticism of the [religious organization](#), and the Liberal Democratic Party - some of whose members had "ties" to groups friendly to the [organization](#) - was swept into the storm.

However, in October 2022, the Kishida administration issued a cabinet decision stating that a dissolution order could not be applied to an organization whose executives had not been criminally convicted, and it answered in the Diet that civil-law torts were "not included" among the requirements. Yet the very next day, Kishida [reversed his previous statement](#), declaring that they "were included".

Until that point, the Agency for Cultural Affairs had maintained that civil-law torts were not part of the requirements, in consideration of the gravity of the "freedom of religion" guaranteed by the Constitution. This position was [overturned overnight](#).

Aside from objections raised by a small number of legal professionals, Kishida's disregard for the principle of due process attracted little attention from opposition parties, the media, or public opinion. Everything unfolded in a manner consistent with the aims of defendant Yamagami.

The neglect of due process was subsequently endorsed by the judiciary as well. If, following the [Tokyo District Court](#), the Tokyo High Court were also to issue a dissolution order, it would produce a result aligned with the defendant's intent to "strike back" at the [organization](#) - effectively granting a "reward" to a terrorist.

In March 2019, following the mosque shootings in New Zealand, then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stated in a parliamentary address, "We will give terrorists nothing." What one hopes for from the Tokyo High Court is not a decision that rewards terrorism, but rather the sound judgment to send a clear message that society must never be allowed to be moved by violence.



*Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand 2017-2023*

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# Religion-State: The Danger Of Policing Belief

- January 31, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



## South Korea's current danger of state overreach: The need to protect religious freedom by limiting state power

Debates about the proper relationship between religion and the state are not unique to Korea. Western democracies, from the United States to France, have long struggled to define where religious freedom ends and state authority begins. What makes the current Korean debate noteworthy, however, is that it is not being driven primarily by culture-war rhetoric or partisan hostility toward religion. Instead, it reflects a growing, sober reassessment of constitutional principles, historical experience, and the dangers that arise when the state begins to treat religion itself as an object of suspicion.

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Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): Segye Ilbo

The 30<sup>th</sup> January article "Signs of Hope Revealed Amid the Debate over the Separation of Religion and State", written by religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) for the daily newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#), argues that South Korea has entered a new phase in its public conversation about church-state relations. Rather than asking whether specific religious groups are "good" or "bad", recent media commentary has begun to ask a more fundamental question: does the government have the constitutional right to investigate, regulate, or judge religion *as religion*? This shift – from moral judgment to constitutional boundary-setting – is the author's central reason for cautious optimism.

### 세계일보

The logo of the [Segye Ilbo](#)

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In January 2026, several major Korean newspapers published reflective articles examining the limits of state intervention in religious affairs. What distinguishes these articles from earlier coverage is their tone and focus. Instead of framing religion primarily as a social problem to be managed, journalists increasingly asked whether state power itself might be overreaching.

For Western readers, it may help to understand that South Korea has no established state religion and formally guarantees religious freedom. Yet in practice, tensions frequently arise when religious groups become politically visible or socially controversial.

Recent investigations into certain new religious movements – often labeled “cults” in popular discourse – have reignited fears that the state could move from prosecuting illegal behavior to scrutinizing belief systems themselves.

Jeong’s [article](#) emphasizes that the new debate is not about defending any particular religious group. Rather, it is about protecting a constitutional principle: the separation of religion and state exists to limit government power, not to silence religion.

**Separation of Church and State: What It Really Means**

One of the [article’s](#) key contributions is its clarification of what “separation of church and state” actually means in the Korean constitutional context. Drawing on a column in the prominent newspaper *Hankyoreh* titled “Render unto Caesar the Things That Are Caesar’s,” the author explains that this principle is often misunderstood.

In popular discourse – both in Korea and in the West – separation is sometimes interpreted as requiring religion to stay out of public life or political discussion. The [article](#) firmly rejects this interpretation. Historically, the separation principle was designed to prevent the state from interfering in religious belief, organization, and expression. It is a shield for religious freedom, not a gag order.

In South Korea, this principle entered constitutional law during the post-World War II period, influenced by American constitutional ideas during the U.S. military administration. Its original purpose was to reject the idea of a state-endorsed religion and to ensure that citizens could practice their faith without government coercion or discrimination. The author stresses that this history matters: separation was never meant to marginalize religion, but to protect pluralism.

**Lessons from History: When the State Overreaches**

To underline the dangers of state interference in religion, the [article](#) turns to historical examples. One particularly painful episode occurred during the authoritarian rule of Chun Doo-hwan (전두환) in the 1980s. Under the banner of “purifying Buddhism” (불교정화), the regime carried out mass arrests, forced detentions, and acts of violence against Buddhist clergy. Decades later, the government formally apologized.

This episode serves as a warning: even when state intervention is framed as reform or public order, targeting religion itself leaves deep social scars. Once the government claims the authority to define what counts as “authentic”, “healthy”, or “acceptable” religion, abuse becomes almost inevitable.

The [article](#) also cites an international example that will resonate with Western readers: the United States’ response to the 11<sup>th</sup> September terrorist attacks. While the U.S. government aggressively pursued those responsible for the attacks, it deliberately avoided treating Islam as a suspect religion. Criminal responsibility was assigned to individuals and organizations, not to a faith tradition. This distinction – between prosecuting crimes and policing belief – is presented as a cornerstone of democratic governance.

**Concerns from Within Religious Communities**

Importantly, the [article](#) notes that concern about state overreach is not limited to religious conservatives or those directly affected by investigations. Voices across ideological lines – including progressive media and mainstream Christian outlets – have expressed unease.

Some Christian commentators worry that once the state becomes comfortable labeling certain religious groups as “heretical” or “social evils”, that logic could eventually be extended to other forms of religion.

Religious affairs correspondent Jeong writes,

“On January 26, the Christian media outlet ‘*News and Joy*’ raised concerns that, amid accelerating investigations into Shincheonji and the [Unification Church](#), this logic could easily spread to Christianity as a whole. When expressions labeling specific religious groups as “heresies” or “social evils” are repeatedly voiced through the mouth of



*Pushing for new anti-religious legislation, even dissolving entire religious organizations: President Lee Jae Myung of the Republic of Korea, here on 29th October 2025, at the Hilton Hotel in Gyeongju, South Korea. Official White House Photo by Molly Riley. Public domain image. Cropped*



*Chun Doo-hwan (1931-2021), South Korean general who led a coup and seized power in December 1979. Served as the country’s president 1980-1988. Photo: Korea.net / Korean Culture and Information Service. License: CC ASA 2.0 Gen*



*According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as “pseudo-religion”: the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.*



*According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as “pseudo-religion”: the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Here, its logo.*

forced through the mechanism of state power, no one can guarantee how far that blade will extend." *Here its logo*

The issue is not theological agreement or disagreement; it is institutional precedent. If the government begins to define religious legitimacy, no group can be certain it will remain protected.

The [article](#) is careful to emphasize that this is not a defense of controversial doctrines or abusive practices. Rather, it is a pragmatic concern about safeguarding religious freedom as a legal principle. Today's unpopular religion could become tomorrow's test case for broader repression.

### Religion's Moral Voice Is Not the Enemy

A symbolic moment highlighted in the article is the selection of a Bible verse – Matthew 22:21, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" – as the "Verse of the Year" by the *Christian Academic Society*, a major Christian scholarly body. For the author, this choice captures the heart of the current debate.

The verse is interpreted not as a call for religious silence, but as a reminder of proper boundaries. The state governs law and order; religion speaks to moral conscience. When these domains are confused – either by religious domination of politics or by political domination of religion – both society and faith suffer.

The [article](#) argues that a healthy democracy allows religious voices to speak ethically and prophetically, while firmly rejecting any attempt by the state to regulate theology or belief.

### A More Mature Democratic Moment

In its concluding sections, the [article](#) suggests that Korea's current debate marks a step toward democratic maturity. Earlier controversies over religion and politics often devolved into ideological battles or expressions of religious hostility. By contrast, the present discussion is increasingly grounded in constitutional law, historical memory, and comparative democratic practice.

The author is clear: illegal acts must be punished without exception. Religious organizations and individuals are not above the law. However, punishment must occur within existing legal frameworks – criminal law, election law, campaign finance law – not through ad hoc judgments about religious legitimacy. The moment the state begins to rule on doctrine or orthodoxy, separation of church and state collapses into a tool of governance.

### Why This Moment Matters

For Western readers, the article's ultimate message will feel familiar yet timely. A society is healthiest when religion does not fear state control, and the state does not view religion as something to be managed or corrected. The emergence of a broad, cross-sector conversation – spanning media, religious communities, and academia – suggests that South Korea may be rediscovering the original meaning of church-state separation.

Given the country's history of authoritarian rule and religious persecution, this reassessment carries particular weight. If the current debate leads to a renewed respect for constitutional boundaries, it may serve as a turning point – one that helps ensure both democratic integrity and genuine religious freedom in the years ahead.

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**Text:** Knut Holdhus, editor

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**Pastor Son Hyun-bo** of the large Segyero Church in Busan, released 30th January 2026 after 143 days of detention for warning his congregation about laws that would criminalize preaching biblical teaching on sexuality. He is however now effectively silenced as the court sentenced him to 6 months, suspended for 1 year, which means he cannot publicly criticize the current administration's policies. Here August 2025. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

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