

## FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Beyond Dissolution: Religious Purge in Japan?

Knut Holdhus  
June 2, 2026



*Attorney Patricia Duval speaking at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland June 16, 2025. She is an attorney admitted to the Paris Bar with a Master's degree in Public Law from the University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. She specializes in international human rights law and has extensive experience advocating for the rights of religious and belief minorities before national and international bodies.*



**Religious purge looming in modern Japan as hostile activists who are advisors to the government want to go much further than mere dissolution**

[Bitter Winter](#), the world's leading online magazine on human rights and religious liberty, published on 1st June 2026 an [article](#) by international human rights lawyer Patricia Duval. She examines developments in Japan following the dissolution order issued against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). Her central argument is that the controversy has moved beyond questions of organizational misconduct and entered a broader struggle over the right of believers to continue

practicing their faith.

According to Duval, the measures advocated by some activist lawyers and hardliner opponents of the [religious organization](#) risk extending far beyond the dissolution of a legal entity and could affect fundamental freedoms protected under international human rights standards. Duval writes,

"Under the influence of such a lobby, several measures have been proposed or already implemented, particularly regarding the continued religious practice of individual believers or groups of believers, as well as the 'issue' of minors raised in their parents' faith, which is considered 'child abuse related to religious belief'."

The [article](#) situates the debate within the wider framework of religious liberty,

"This form of witch hunt - or religious purge - in a modern democracy, disguised as a campaign against 'cults', poses a real threat to freedom of conscience and the freedom to practice the religion of one's choice, as well as to the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, all of which are protected by the treaties Japan committed to uphold after the end of World War II."

Duval argues that these rights remain applicable even when a religious organization loses its legal status. She contends that some critics of the [Family Federation](#) are not merely seeking remedies for specific alleged abuses but are pursuing policies that would restrict the religion itself, its adherents, and its ability to function as a community of believers.

A major theme of the [article](#) is the distinction between punishing unlawful conduct by individuals and suppressing the religious activities of an entire faith community. Duval maintains that international human rights principles generally require these two issues to be treated separately. In her view, the dissolution decision has been followed by calls for additional measures that would limit fundraising, communal worship, religious education within families, and the ability of believers to organize themselves. She characterizes these proposals as elements of a broader anti-heresy campaign.



*Not content with a mere dissolution order, pursuing policies that would restrict the religion itself, its adherents, and its ability to function as a community of believers: Leading exponents of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales: attorneys Hiroshi Yamaguchi (left) and Masaki Kito (right)*

### **The Reaction to the Dissolution Order**

Duval begins by noting that opponents of the [Family Federation](#) welcomed the Tokyo High Court's [dissolution order](#) issued in March 2026. However, she says many critics quickly expressed dissatisfaction because the [decision](#) did not amount to a complete prohibition of the religion in Japan.

According to the [article](#), some anti-[Federation](#) activists serving as advisors to the government argued that the dissolution of the [organization](#) was only a first step. They maintained that believers could continue gathering, teaching their faith, and engaging in missionary activities even after the legal entity had been dissolved. For these critics, Duval writes, this remaining religious activity represented an unresolved problem.



*From an information stand organized by International Federation for Victory over Communism (IFVOC) in Japan in the 1970s, during the Cold War period. IFVOC was founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) in 1968 in Seoul, South Korea.*

She argues that certain opponents view the [Family Federation](#) differently from traditional religious groups that may occasionally engage in misconduct. In their assessment, the issue is not simply problematic practices that could be corrected but rather the doctrines of the religion itself. These critics reportedly regard the [Federation's](#) teachings as inherently problematic, calling it "heretical", and its evangelizing efforts as a form of psychological manipulation they label as "mind control" [See editor's note 1 below].

Duval contends that this perspective advocated by hostile lobbyists has encouraged proposals aimed not only at regulating organizations but also at restricting the activities of individual believers and informal groups of worshippers. She further argues that those lobbyists have increasingly focused on children raised within the faith, with some critics characterizing such religious upbringing as a form of abuse. In her view, these developments raise serious questions regarding religious freedom in a democratic society.

### The Anti-Heresy Alliance

A significant portion of the [article](#) examines the role of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS). Duval describes the activist network as having historical connections with leftwing lawyers who opposed what was then called the [Unification Church](#) during the Cold War period, when [Church](#) members were active in campaigns against communism in East Asia.

She explains that NNLASS later cooperated with Protestant pastors who regarded the [Unification Church](#) as a theological rival. According to the [article](#), this alliance continued for decades and became involved in efforts to coerce members to leave the [Church](#).

Duval discusses the controversial practice of faith-breaking [See editor's note 2 below], commonly referred to as "deprogramming", whereby believers were allegedly abducted or confined by relatives and pressured to renounce their faith through coercive counseling and religious instruction. She states that Japanese authorities long treated these incidents as private family matters rather than religious freedom concerns.

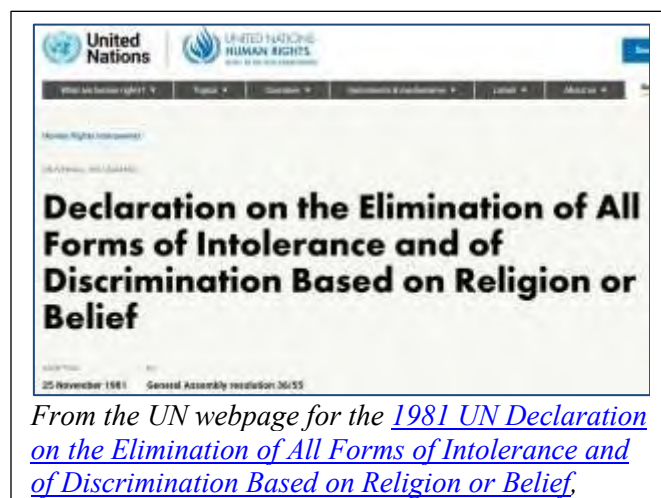


The [article](#) notes that international attention was eventually drawn to the issue. Duval points out that the United Nations Human Rights Committee urged Japan in 2014 to take stronger action against such practices. She presents this history as an important backdrop for understanding current debates about the treatment of [Family Federation](#) members.

### Calls for Stronger Restrictions

Following the High Court's [dissolution decision](#), Duval writes, NNLASS publicly welcomed the [ruling](#) while arguing that additional legal reforms were necessary.

According to the [article](#), the lawyers contend that fundraising associated with the [Family Federation](#) should continue to be regulated even if conducted by informal groups or individual believers rather than by a recognized religious corporation. Their position rests on the argument that [Federation](#) members allegedly influence potential donors in ways that compromise genuine freedom of choice, "leading them to make donations as instructed."



Duval strongly disputes this characterization. She argues that it is based on the theory of "mind control" [See editor's note 1 below], which she describes as lacking scientific credibility and having been rejected by courts in many jurisdictions. From her perspective, the notion that believers can fundamentally alter another person's value system through religious persuasion does not provide a sound basis for restricting religious activity.

The [article](#) therefore criticizes proposals by the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS) to amend donation laws in ways that would apply not only to

organizations but also to ordinary believers acting independently. Duval argues that such measures would effectively prevent adherents from supporting their own religious community financially. The Paris-based human rights lawyer explains,

"Even if the [Church](#) had committed wrongdoing, only the individuals involved could be punished, and the

practice of religion should not be affected.

Yet NNCLASS lawyers want to go further than dissolution and prevent the religious practice by individuals or groups of faithful, and forbid the raising of necessary donations to fund their activities, in violation of the right to 'establish and maintain religious institutions' protected by international human rights instruments, in particular the [1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#), Article 6(f): 'The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief includes the freedom to solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions'."

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Her work has included engagement with institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union, and the United Nations. In addition to her legal practice, she has authored numerous academic publications on freedom of religion or belief. Photo: Screenshot from video recording by UPF. Image resolution improved by Grok xAI, June 2026.

**[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.]



*Also subject to faith-breaking attempts: Members of Soka Gakkai. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001*

**[Editor's note 2:** Coercive faith-breaking ("deprogramming") in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to

new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the [Family Federation](#) or Jehovah's Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]

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From the Yankee Stadium event 1st June 1976. Photo: FFWPU

On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1976, a large outdoor rally was held at Yankee Stadium in New York. The event was one of the most significant public appearances of **Sun Myung Moon** – also known as **Father Moon** – in the United States and a major milestone in the history of the **Unification Church** – now called the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**. Organized as the “**God Bless America Festival**,” the gathering formed part of **Father Moon**’s nationwide campaign during the American Bicentennial year, a period when questions about the nation’s identity, purpose, and future were receiving widespread attention.

The festival attracted approximately 50,000 participants and spectators to the famous baseball stadium in New York City. The event combined elements of a religious revival, a patriotic celebration, and a public rally. Attendees included members of the **Unification Church**, supporters from various Christian backgrounds, curious observers, journalists, and critics. The scale of the gathering was remarkable, especially considering that **Father Moon** and his movement were still relatively unfamiliar to much of the American public. For many Americans, the festival represented their first substantial exposure to **Sun Myung Moon** and his message.

In the days leading up to the event, extensive publicity campaigns had been conducted throughout New York and other major cities.

The gathering received substantial media attention, including coverage by national and international news organizations. The international news magazine Newsweek used a photograph of **Father Moon** standing in front of the rally posters as its cover image, accompanied by an extensive feature article inside the magazine. Newsweek also published one of the very few interviews **Father Moon** ever gave.



The front cover page of the 14th June 1976 edition of Newsweek. Photo: Knut Holdhus

International journalists also followed the event closely, and it also marked the first time Korean media reported on **Father Moon**’s activities in the United States. A Korean reporter covering the event said,

“**Reverend Moon** is truly the first Korean who has moved the world.”

South Korea had only just begun to recover from the enormous devastation of the Korean War. The journalist simply could not understand how it was possible for a



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simply could not understand how it was possible for a Korean to gather 50,000 people for such a tremendously successful event in the United States.

A dramatic aspect of the day was the weather. Shortly before the program was scheduled to begin, heavy rain and strong winds threatened to disrupt the proceedings. Organizers feared that the event might be canceled or severely damaged. Refusing to be defeated, members led the stadium in singing "You Are My Sunshine" until the storm would go away.



*The Korean Folk Ballet at Yankee Stadium 1st June 1976 performing "The Royal Fan Dance". Screenshot from video by FFWPU. Image resolution improved by Grok xAI, June 2026.*

And it worked! The weather improved just before the main program commenced, allowing the gathering to proceed as planned. Among participants, the sudden clearing of the skies was often remembered as a sign from above. Jesus had felt abandoned by **God** on the cross. That was how members of the **Unification Church** felt when the storm was at its worst and threatened to tear down all the decorations they had put up around the stadium.

The centerpiece of the festival was **Father Moon's** address, "**God's** Hope for America." Speaking during the United States Bicentennial year, he presented America as a nation with a unique providential role in history and urged it to renew its relationship with **God**.

**Reverend Moon** argued that human beings and nations face a fundamental choice between selfishness and selflessness. He maintained that lasting prosperity comes when individuals place the welfare of family, nation, humanity, and ultimately **God** above personal interests. According to his message, America's historical success was not accidental but the result of divine guidance. He praised the religious ideals of many early settlers and described the United States as a nation created from many races and nationalities, making it a model for a future world united beyond ethnic and national divisions.

A central theme of the speech was warning. **Father Moon** claimed that America was experiencing moral and spiritual decline because it had moved away from its religious foundations. He pointed to social disorder, family breakdown, and loss of faith as signs of a deeper crisis. He argued that America could maintain its strength and leadership only by returning to what he called a **God-centered** way of life. Without that foundation, he warned, the nation would become vulnerable to internal decay and to atheistic communism, which he portrayed as a major ideological threat.

**Father Moon** also called for greater unity among Christians, cooperation among religions, and the creation of "One World Under **God**". He presented **Unificationism** as part of a broader spiritual renewal intended to help achieve global harmony. The speech concluded with an appeal for Americans and people worldwide to dedicate themselves to **God**, moral responsibility, and the building of a peaceful world united as one human family.

In his speech, he argued that America's historical success

and global influence were rooted in its religious heritage and commitment to [God](#). He warned that moral decline, materialism, and loss of spiritual purpose threatened the nation's future. At the same time, he expressed confidence that America could fulfill a special mission in the world if it renewed its faith and sense of responsibility.



*From the postering campaign in New York City in the weeks leading up to the event in Yankee Stadium on 1st June 1976. The day after the rally all the posters were taken down, making it one of the cleanest campaigns ever in New York City. Photo: [FFWPU](#)*

The Yankee Stadium rally marked a turning point for the [Father Moon's](#) and [Mother Han's](#) movement in the USA. It demonstrated the [organization's](#) capacity to stage a major national event, attracted extensive press coverage, and helped establish [Sun Myung Moon](#) as a controversial but increasingly visible religious figure on the American public stage during the 1970s.

**Text:** *Knut Holdhus, editor*

**Featured image** above: [Sun Myung Moon](#) speaking at Yankee Stadium, New York 1<sup>st</sup> June 1976, aided by translator [Pak Bo-hi](#). Screenshot from video by [FFWPU](#). Image resolution improved by Grok xAI, June 2026.

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