

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan's Next Target - Believers' Rights

Knut Holdhus
June 5, 2026



French international human rights lawyer Patricia Duval in Tokyo February 5, 2025. She is a member of the Paris Bar Association, specializing in international human rights law. Earned a degree in public law from Sorbonne University. Has defended the rights of religious and faith minorities both in France and internationally, including at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the Council of Europe (CE), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations. Author of numerous academic papers on religion and freedom of belief



Not satisfied with dissolving the Family Federation, hostile activists advising the authorities are now targeting believers' rights

On 1st June 2026, [Bitter Winter](#), a leading online magazine focused on human rights and religious freedom, published an [article](#) by international human rights lawyer Patricia Duval. In her [analysis](#), Duval examines recent developments in Japan following the [dissolution order](#) issued against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). She argues that the debate has evolved beyond allegations of organizational wrongdoing and has become part of a wider contest over the rights of believers to

practice and maintain their faith.

More from Duval: [Beyond Dissolution: A Religious Purge in Japan?](#)

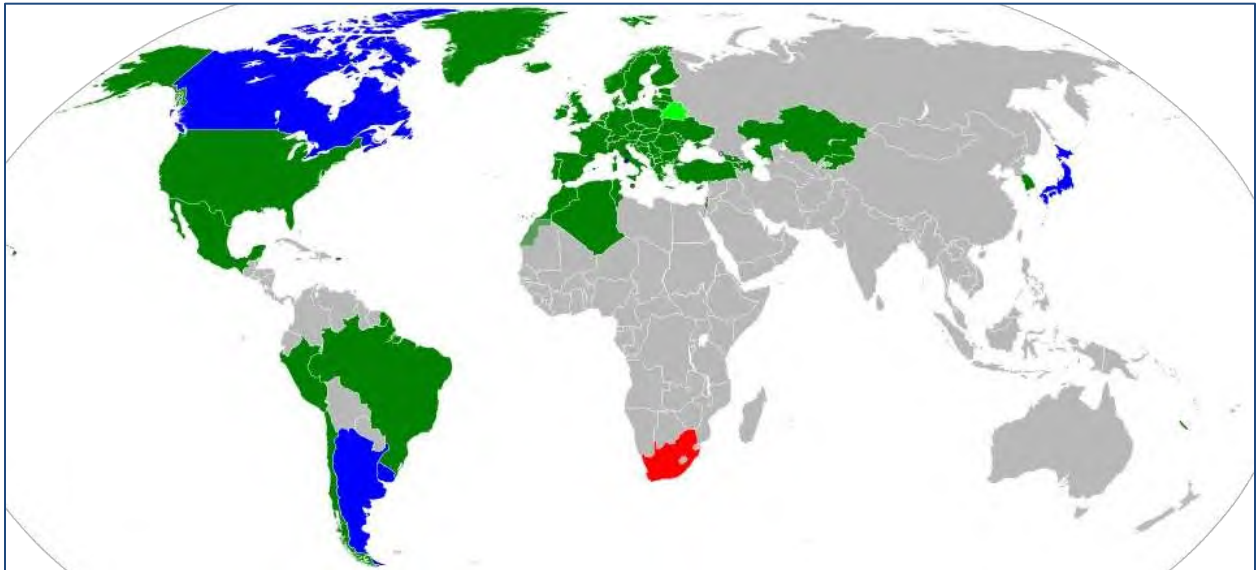
More from Duval: [Religious Freedom in Jeopardy After Dissolution](#)

The Rights of Religious Communities

A central legal argument in the [article](#) concerns the status of religious communities under international law. Duval emphasizes that the [Family Federation](#) possesses a developed body of doctrine, a defined religious identity, and a large community of followers. For that reason, she argues, it qualifies as a religious community entitled to the protections recognized in international human rights instruments.

She observes that the dissolution of the principal [Family Federation](#) organization in Japan left many believers without established places of worship and without the institutional structure that had previously coordinated their activities. In her view, this situation makes the protection of individual religious rights even more important.

To support this position, Duval refers to guidelines issued by the Venice Commission, the constitutional advisory body of the Council of Europe. She highlights the Commission's view that religious activities should not become illegal merely because an organization lacks formal legal registration.



Member states of the Venice Commission per December 2020. As of 2026, the Commission counts 61 member states - the 46 member states of the Council of Europe and 15 non-European countries. Nations marked in blue, including Japan, Uruguay, Argentina, and the Holy See have observer status. Russia has been expelled

The [article](#) further stresses that withdrawing legal personality from a religious organization should not deprive either the community or its members of the protections associated with freedom of religion and belief. Duval argues that collective penalties imposed on an entire religious community are inconsistent with the principle that responsibility for wrongdoing should rest with specific individuals.



Is the [Family Federation](#) in Japan heading for the same fate as the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia - banned? Here, two followers of JW at an information stand in Oslo, Norway March 11, 2026

Fundraising as a Religious Freedom Issue

Duval also addresses the issue of donations. She argues that religious communities cannot realistically function without financial support and that the ability to seek and receive voluntary contributions forms part of internationally recognized religious liberty.

In her view, attempts to prohibit believers from collecting donations after dissolution would effectively prevent them from maintaining religious institutions, organizing meetings, and sustaining communal religious life.

The [article](#) therefore frames fundraising not merely as an economic activity but as an aspect of religious practice protected under international human rights standards. Duval contends that restrictions targeting donations could become a mechanism for suppressing the religion itself.

Comparisons with Russia

One of the strongest arguments in the [article](#) involves comparison with developments in Russia. Duval notes that the religion of

Jehovah's Witnesses has been banned there as extremist and that believers have faced prosecution for ordinary religious activities.

She points to a March 2026 decision by the United Nations Human Rights Committee criticizing Russia for violations of religious freedom in cases involving Jehovah's Witnesses. According to Duval, the Committee required remedies for those affected and called for measures to prevent future violations.

The [article](#) suggests that proposals aimed at preventing [Family Federation](#) believers from gathering, fundraising, or practicing their faith could move Japan toward a model that resembles the Russian approach. Duval regards this possibility as deeply troubling from a human rights perspective.

International Cooperation Among Anti-Cult Activists

Duval further discusses cooperation between Japanese "anti-cult" lawyers and South Korean Christian organizations engaged in "anti-heresy" work.



From header of the [webpage](#) of the Human Rights Committee, a subpage on the site of the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner



Hiroshi Yamaguchi, activist leftwing lawyer and founder and leading member of National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS)

According to the [article](#), agreements were reached to coordinate efforts against groups classified as "cults" and to encourage legislation targeting such organizations. Duval interprets these developments as evidence that the campaign extends beyond Japan and reflects a broader movement seeking stricter controls on certain religious groups.

She also notes a statement from leading activist lawyer Hiroshi Yamaguchi (山口廣), founder of National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS), indicating concern among his fellow Japanese activists that younger pastors have shown less interest in anti-cult faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below] activities than previous generations. The [article](#) suggests that this has encouraged greater cooperation with South Korean counterparts who remain active in "anti-heresy" initiatives.

Duval writes,

"The representative of the Japanese lawyers explained that they have a serious problem in Japan: pastors who have been 'counseling' believers and lost believers are in their 70s and 80s, and young pastors are not very involved. He stated that 'People who offer counseling do not grow up much in Japan. I envy the Korean system, which has consultation offices all over the country. We want to work with the pastors.' It appears that, since Japanese pastors have stopped practicing deprogramming [See editor's note 1 below] and the 'counseling' of reluctant members has declined, Japanese lawyers are seeking to collaborate with Korean pastors who are actively fighting against heresy and who are known to continue engaging in such activities."

Paris-based human rights attorney Duval also notes,

"Furthermore, to continue the purge that had been carried out for decades in Japan through the deprogramming [See editor's note 1 below] of believers, the lawyers proposed measures aimed at 'de-indoctrinating' their children within the public school system."

indoctrinating' their children within the public school system."

Focus on Second-Generation Believers

The final section of the [article](#) addresses children raised within the faith. Duval reports that NNLASS recommended policies intended to support what it describes as second-generation members [See editor's note 2 below] of religious groups.

According to [her account](#), these recommendations from "anti-cult" lawyers included educational and intervention measures designed to influence children who had grown up in the [Family Federation](#). Duval characterizes such proposals as efforts to steer young people away from the beliefs of their parents.

She argues that these measures represent a continuation, through public institutions, of earlier attempts to coerce members to abandon their faith. The [article](#) notes that the recommendations the activist lawyers made in December 2023, were subsequently implemented in a government plan adopted already one month later, in January 2024.

Conclusion

In this first installment of her series, Patricia Duval emphasizes that the "anti-cult" activists are far from contented with the dissolution of the [Family Federation](#) in Japan and want to outright limit the rights of believers themselves. She contends that the activists seek not merely accountability for alleged wrongdoing but restrictions that would affect worship, religious association, fundraising, and the transmission of faith within families.

Throughout the [article](#), Duval evaluates these developments through the lens of international human rights law. Her position is that dissolving a religious organization does not extinguish the rights of its members

and that measures preventing believers from practicing their faith would conflict with internationally recognized standards of religious freedom.

More from Duval: [Beyond Dissolution: A Religious Purge in Japan?](#)

More from Duval: [Religious Freedom in Jeopardy After Dissolution](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note 1: 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.



Also subject to faith-breaking attempts: Members of Soka Gakkai. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp](#). Cropped

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.]

[Editor's note 2: The term "second-generation members" generally refers to people who were raised in a religion by parents who belonged to a religious organization, rather than joining it themselves as adults.]

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Alleged Bias: Investigating The Investigators

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The Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) is currently examining claims that a team of special prosecutors conducted a politically biased investigation involving leaders of Unificationism



Prosecutor being investigated: **Min Joong-gi** (민중기)
Image: G20K.AI

Prosecutor being Investigated: **Park Sang-jin** (박상진)
Image: G20K.AI

South Korea's system of special prosecutors under scrutiny for alleged bias politically in case involving Mother Han and former Unificationism leaders

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On 2nd June 2026, South Korea's 24-hour **news channel YTN** reported on a growing political and legal controversy involving an investigation into alleged favoritism during a high-

profile special prosecutors' probe connected to the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** – in Korea often simply called **Unificationism** (통일교). The case has attracted significant attention because it touches on sensitive issues of political impartiality, prosecutorial conduct, and the relationship between religion, business, and politics in South Korea.

See also [Complaint Filed Against Lead Special Prosecutor](#)

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Logo of CIO. Author: Government of South Korea

At the center of the dispute is the **Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO)**, an independent agency established to investigate alleged crimes by senior public officials. The CIO is currently examining claims that a team of special prosecutors (특별검사팀) led by Min Joong-gi (민중기) conducted a politically biased investigation when looking into allegations that figures associated with **Unificationism** provided money or other benefits to politicians.

According to **YTN**, the CIO recently questioned Park Sang-jin (박상진), a former assistant special prosecutor (counsel) who worked on the investigation. He was interviewed as a witness rather than as a suspect. The questioning marks an important step in the CIO's efforts to determine whether the team of special prosecutors improperly focused its investigation on members of the conservative **People Power Party (PPP)** while failing to investigate politicians affiliated with the liberal **Democratic Party of Korea (DPK)**.



Yoon Yeong-ho, here 5th December 2021. Screenshot from live transmission from an international rally by **FFWPU**.

The allegations emerged from statements made by **Yoon Yeong-ho** 윤영호, a former senior official of **Unificationism**. **Yoon** has himself been indicted on charges related to the alleged provision of money and valuables to prominent political figures, including Kim Keon-hee (김건희), the wife of former President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열), and National Assembly member Kweon Seong-dong (권성동).

During his own criminal trial, **Yoon** argued that he had informed investigators about



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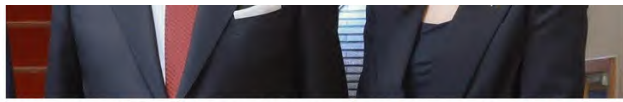
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He was given life sentence, she 4 years in what some perceive as revenge on political opponents: Former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and First Lady Kim Keon-hee, here in Tokyo 16th March 2023. Photo: [首相官邸ホームページ / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

contacts not only with conservative politicians but also with politicians belonging to the Democratic Party. He complained that these statements did not appear in the evidentiary materials presented in court. His claim raised questions about whether investigators had selectively pursued certain political figures while ignoring others.

The team of special prosecutors has rejected accusations of political bias. According to its explanation, Yoon's statements concerning Democratic Party politicians were recorded in an investigative report. However, the team concluded that those matters did not fall within the legal scope of the special prosecutors' mandate under the relevant legislation. Investigators therefore intended to transfer the information to other authorities for possible future action rather than pursue it themselves.

Despite this defense, the controversy continued to grow. The *People Power Party* accused the team of special prosecutors of conducting a partisan investigation and formally filed a complaint against Special Prosecutor Min Joong-gi (민중기). Critics argued that if investigators possessed information suggesting potential wrongdoing involving politicians from multiple parties, they should have treated all such leads consistently.

The CIO subsequently launched its own investigation into the matter. Earlier this year, investigators executed search-and-seizure operations at the offices used by the team of special prosecutors and obtained mobile phones belonging to both Min and Park. These measures indicate that the CIO is treating the allegations seriously and is seeking documentary and electronic evidence that may shed light on how investigative decisions were made.

YTN reported that Min Joong-gi has already been formally registered as a suspect in the CIO's investigation. Based on evidence collected so far, including witness testimony from former members of the team of special prosecutors, the agency is expected to summon him for questioning in the near future. Investigators will likely focus on whether decisions about investigative targets were made on legal grounds or whether political considerations influenced the course of the inquiry.

For international observers, the case illustrates the intense scrutiny applied to politically sensitive investigations in South Korea. The dispute is not primarily about whether the underlying allegations involving **Unificationism** are true or false; rather, it concerns whether investigators applied the law impartially. As the CIO's investigation progresses, the outcome could have important implications for public confidence in South Korea's system of special prosecutors and the perceived neutrality of major corruption investigations involving prominent political figures.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Special prosecutors Min Joong-gi (민중기) – left – and Park Sang-jin (박상진). Images by Grok xAI.

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Unification Church in Japan: After the Dissolution, the Purge — 1. Anti Heresy Campaigns

by Patricia Duval | Jun 1, 2026 | Op-eds Global

How lawyers and religious competitors have pushed Japan toward measures that target believers even after the organization's dissolution.

by Patricia Duval

Article 1 of 4.



Leading exponents of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales: attorneys Hiroshi Yamaguchi (left) and Masaki Kito (right). Screenshot.

Following the dissolution order issued in March by the Tokyo High Court against the Federation of Families for World Peace and Unification (hereinafter referred to as “the Unification Church” or “the Church”), opponents of the Church issued several statements expressing satisfaction, but also frustration that the dissolution did not lead to a complete ban of the Unification Church in the country. Anti Church activists, led by some lawyers and religious competitors, urged the government to go further to prevent the very practice of the religion in Japan.

According to them, the problem with the Unification Church does not lie so much in deviant practices that could be corrected—as occasionally happens in traditional religions—but rather in the faith itself, which they deem heretical, and in proselytizing, which they view as a form of mind control. Under the influence of 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.” 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.

Anti Heresy Movement

The National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS)—founded by lawyers close to the Communist Party at a time when Church members were campaigning against the spread of atheistic communism in East Asia—joined forces in 1987 with a group of Protestant pastors who viewed the Unification Church as a rival sect to eliminate the Church from Japan. For the following three decades, these lawyers worked in coordination with pastors involved in the “deprogramming” or forced deconversion of believers through their abduction and confinement by families, and coerced indoctrination by pastors to recant the religion. This longstanding practice was euphemistically referred to as a “family issue” or “protection” by the Japanese authorities, who covered it up until the Human Rights Committee, in 2014, urged them to put a definitive end to it.

NNLASS lawyers, who pledged the elimination of the Church, [made a statement](#) right after the release of the High Court decision on March 4. They welcomed the Court’s decision but stated that it was not sufficient. Based on a biased interpretation of the religion—which they view as a form of mental manipulation—and of donations made to the Church—which they see as mere commercial transactions, completely disregarding the faith of the believers who solicit these donations—they claim that even future fundraising by groups of believers would constitute “unfair solicitation of donations,” just as the Church previously did.

And they call for a revision of the law on the prevention of abusive solicitation of donations: “The current Unfair Donation Solicitation Prevention Act still shows several shortcomings from the perspective of preventing or remedying the specific type of victimization seen with the Unification Church. This involves victims having

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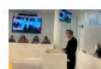
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type of victimization seen with the Unification Church. This involves victims having their value judgments altered through illegal proselytizing activities that infringe upon freedom of religious choice, leading them to make donations as instructed. Furthermore, as the Act primarily prevents donation solicitation by corporations, it cannot regulate similar solicitation activities conducted by the Unification Church or its members as voluntary groups after losing their religious corporation status, or by individuals.”

These allegations—that Unification Church members “alter people’s value judgments” through “illegal proselytizing activities that infringe upon freedom of religious choice”—are based on the discredited and unsubstantiated theory of mind control, which courts of law have rejected as nonscientific worldwide.

Based on this flawed theory, the NNLASS recommended amending the law to prohibit the collection of donations by groups of followers or by individual believers who wish to continue practicing the Unification Church’s faith. However, this is a Christian inspired denomination with a body of doctrine developed by its founder and a large community of followers, which therefore meets the criteria for a religious community under international law and, as such, deserves the protection afforded by that law.

The dissolution of the only Unification Church religious entity that brought together all of Japan’s churches, along with the cessation of all related activities, left hundreds of thousands of believers without places of worship or any means to practice their religion in community with others in Japan.

The European Commission for Democracy through Law—better known as the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe’s advisory body composed of top constitutional experts—issued Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities, which provide that “the legal prohibition and sanctioning of unregistered activities is incompatible with international standards.”

In particular, the Commission specifically addressed the dissolution of religious organizations: “The withdrawal of legal personality from a religious or belief organization should not in any way imply that the religious or belief community in question, or its individual members, no longer enjoy the protection of their freedom of religion or belief or other human rights and fundamental freedoms... Doing so would impose a collective sanction on the community as a whole for actions that in fairness should be attributed to specific individuals” (§34).

Even if the Church had committed wrongdoing, only the individuals involved could be punished, and the practice of religion should not be affected. Yet NNLASS 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 Declaration of the National Assembly, 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.”

The lawyers’ stance amounts to advocating the banning of an entire religion from Japan, just as in totalitarian states such as Russia, where the religion of Jehovah’s Witnesses has been banned as extremist and believers are regularly prosecuted for holding group meetings and reading the Bible at home. On March 13, 2026, the United Nations Human Rights Committee condemned the Russian Federation for violating their right to freedom of religion as a result of these arrests and incarcerations. The ruling [obliges Russia](#) to provide full reparations to the Witnesses involved and to take measures to prevent similar violations in the future (“Vilitkevich et al. v. Russian Federation,” CCPR/C/145/D/3192/2018).

In contravention of these international human rights standards, NNLASS proposed similar measures to prohibit the practice of the Unification Church faith in Japan. They also expressed their intention to spread similar repression to South Korea, according to statements made to the media. On January 8, 2025, the NNLASS signed an agreement with the The Korean Association of Christian Heresy Counseling Centers to cooperate in their fight against “cults” in Japan and Korea and help “pass laws that regulate cult organizations in South Korea” (cf. article [published in “Kirishin,”](#) a Korean Christian newspaper, on January 21, 2025).



NNLASS’ Hiroshi Yamaguchi (right) signs the agreement with The Korean Association of Christian Heresy Counseling Centers. From X.

The representative of the Japanese lawyers [explained](#) that they have a serious problem in Japan: pastors who have been “counseling” believers and lost believers are in their 70s and 80s, and young pastors are not very involved. He stated that “People who offer counseling do not grow up much in Japan. I envy the Korean system, which has consultation offices all over the country. We want to work with the pastors.” It appears that, since Japanese pastors have stopped practicing deprogramming and the “counseling” of reluctant members has declined, Japanese lawyers are seeking to collaborate with Korean pastors who are actively fighting against heresy and who are known to continue engaging in such activities.

Furthermore, to continue the purge that had been carried out for decades in Japan through the deprogramming of believers, the lawyers proposed measures aimed at “de-indoctrinating” their children within the public school system.

The>NNLASS issued an Opinion in December 2023, recommending that the authorities adopt measures to re-educate second-generation believers to turn them away from their parents’ faith (Opinion Paper on the “Prevention of Harm and Support for Second-Generation Members of Religious and Similar Groups,” December 14, 2023).

This recommendation was implemented through a plan adopted at a Cabinet meeting on January 19, 2024 (the “Proposed Measures to Enhance and Strengthen Support for Victims of the ‘Former Unification Church,’” hereafter the “Plan”).

[Anti-Cult, Japan, Religious Liberty, Unification Church](#)



Patricia Duval

Patricia Duval is an attorney and a member of the Paris Bar. She has a Master in Public Law from La Sorbonne University, and specializes in international human rights law. She has defended the rights of minorities of religion or belief in domestic and international fora, and before international institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Union, and the United Nations. She has also published numerous scholarly articles on freedom of religion or belief.



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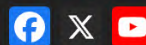
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