

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Massimo Introvigne on Serious Questions on Japan's Banning Family Fed

Knut Holdhus
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Massimo Introvigne was born in Rome, Italy, in June 1955. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars specializing in new religious movements. He has authored approximately 70 books and more than 100 academic articles in the field of sociology of religion and serves as editor-in-chief of the online magazine Bitter Winter.



Japan's hasty Supreme Court verdict raises serious concerns about due process, judicial impartiality, and religious freedom

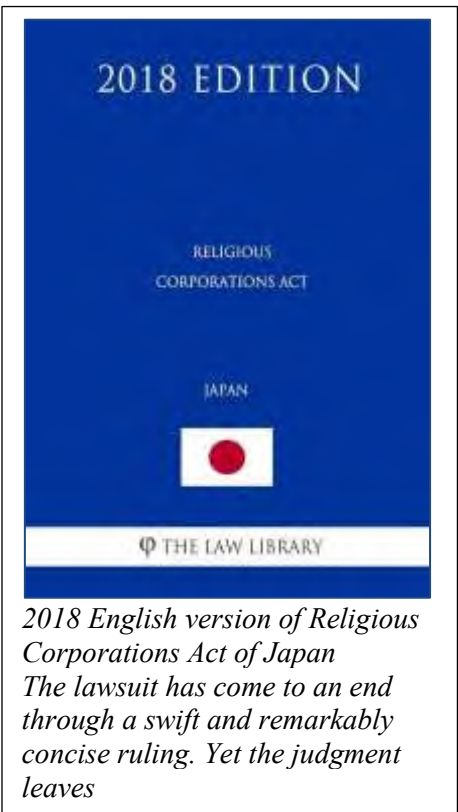
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Part 1 of opinion contribution by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Founder and Managing Director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR)

Japan's Supreme Court Finalizes Dissolution of the Family Federation

Serious Questions About Neutrality and Due Process

by Massimo Introvigne, Sociologist of Religion



*2018 English version of Religious Corporations Act of Japan
The lawsuit has come to an end through a swift and remarkably concise ruling. Yet the judgment leaves*

Serious questions regarding judicial neutrality, due process, and the future of religious freedom in Japan.

On 23rd June, Japan's Supreme Court finalized the Tokyo High Court's [2026 decision](#) upholding the dissolution order against the [Unification Church](#) (the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)). The decision was issued with unusual speed, and its reasoning leaves many important questions unanswered.

The ruling concludes a series of judicial proceedings that began after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三). Throughout the process, however, the case unfolded amid political pressure, a hostile media environment, and a [new interpretation](#) of the Religious Corporations Act that opened the door to a legal outcome previously regarded as impossible.

Bitter Winter previously analyzed the [Tokyo High Court's decision](#) in detail. That [ruling](#) relied primarily on civil lawsuits dating back several decades and adopted an expansive interpretation of Article 81 of the Religious Corporations Act. It treated acts of civil wrongdoing (tortious acts) committed by

individual believers as grounds for dissolving the [religious corporation](#) itself. Moreover, the conduct at issue consisted neither of criminal offenses nor of recent acts.



[Bitter Winter](#), the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights.

The [Tokyo High Court](#) further embraced the proposition that a religious organization may be dissolved if aspects of its internal culture or doctrinal characteristics are deemed likely to create a risk of future harm. This standard is extraordinarily vague and expansive and, if applied broadly, could potentially be used against virtually any religion.

The Supreme Court has now fully endorsed that reasoning. Its decision is notably brief. While dismissing the appeal, it offers almost no additional analysis beyond affirming the [High Court's conclusions](#).

The core of the decision merely repeats the lower court's findings, accepting its factual determinations without substantial independent examination and adopting its legal framework without responding to concerns raised by scholars, human rights experts, and international observers.

The Supreme Court states that a dissolution order affects only the legal status of the [religious corporation](#) and does not restrict believers' freedom to practice their faith itself. Therefore, it concludes, the order does not violate the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion.



Forced to hold worship services at home: Members of the [Family Federation](#) in Japan gathering in someone's home on April 5, 2026

The Court also acknowledges that liquidation proceedings will result in the [disposal of property](#) that has been used for places of worship and religious activities. Nevertheless, it characterizes these consequences not as restrictions on religious life but merely as "indirect" effects.

This reasoning simply mirrors that of the [Tokyo High Court](#) without confronting the more fundamental issue: in Japan, the loss of corporate legal status has an enormous practical impact on believers' religious lives. Losing legal personality directly affects the ability to own property, manage finances, employ staff, and maintain stable, ongoing religious activities.

The Supreme Court characterizes these consequences as merely "indirect", but that characterization fails to reflect the reality of how religious communities actually function.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon.

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

June 2026
opinion
column
published
in the
South Korean daily newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#), religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) argues that Japan's recent court-ordered dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) – in Korea often referred to as [Unificationism](#) (통일교) – raises broader questions about religious liberty, democratic principles, and the relationship between public sentiment and judicial authority.

See also [Supreme Court Upholds Dissolution of Federation](#)

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The [column](#) was written shortly after Japan's [Supreme Court](#) finalized a [lower-court decision](#) ordering the dissolution of the [religious corporation](#). While acknowledging that court rulings deserve respect and that unlawful conduct should be addressed through legal processes, Jeong expresses concern that the case may represent a [troubling precedent](#) in which popular hostility toward a religious minority has overshadowed fundamental protections for freedom of religion.

According to the author, the central issue is not whether individuals who allegedly suffered harm many years ago should receive justice, nor whether criticized fundraising or donation practices should be subject to legal scrutiny. Rather, the question is whether dissolving an entire [religious corporation](#) constitutes a proportionate response to the violations identified by the courts. Jeong notes that Japanese authorities relied primarily on findings of civil wrongdoing related to donation practices rather than criminal convictions involving senior leaders of the [organization](#). In his view, this distinction is significant because the case marks the first time in modern Japanese constitutional history that a [religious corporation](#) has been dissolved on the basis of civil violations rather than serious criminal misconduct.

The columnist traces the origins of the controversy to the 2022 assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三). The assassin claimed that his family had suffered financial difficulties due to his mother's donations to the [religious organization](#). He cited this grievance as a motive for the attack. Jeong argues that while such claims deserved investigation and victims' concerns warranted attention, the actions of a lone criminal and the continued existence of an entire [religious body](#) are fundamentally different matters. He suggests that a combination of intense media scrutiny, political distancing, and rapidly deteriorating public opinion created an environment in which collective blame came to be assigned to the [religious organization](#) itself.

A major theme of the [article](#) is the danger posed when public anger exerts excessive influence over legal and political institutions. Jeong contends that democratic societies are most vulnerable when emotional reactions and majority sentiment overwhelm principled protections for minority rights. In his interpretation, freedom of religion exists precisely to safeguard groups that may be unpopular or controversial. Rights that are granted only to organizations enjoying broad social approval cease to function as genuine freedoms and instead become privileges extended selectively by the majority.



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The crucifixion of the 26 Catholic martyrs of Nagasaki, Japan 5th Feb. 1597. A painting in the franciscan convent of the Lady of the Snows in Prague. Photo: Pavel Vnenk. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

The author also places the controversy within a longer historical framework. He argues that Japan's modern reputation as a democratic society committed to religious freedom should not obscure historical patterns of suspicion toward foreign-origin religions and unfamiliar faith traditions. The [column](#) recalls the [persecution of Christians](#) during earlier periods of Japanese history, when many believers were executed and others were forced to conceal their faith for generations. It further references the difficulties faced by Korean religious and cultural communities during the colonial era, as well as the state's efforts after the Meiji Restoration to establish an emperor-centered religious order through State Shinto.



The Meiji Emperor among gods and emperors. This 1878 engraving by Toyohara Chikanobu (1838 – 1912) visually presents the **central tenet of State Shinto** (1871-1946). This Shinto variant asserted and promoted belief in the divinity of the Emperor, which arose from a genealogical family tree extending back to the first emperor and to the most important deities of Japanese mythology. Emperor Meiji in a Western chair with his wife, Empress Shōken, is seated in the foreground. Photographic reproduction: Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image

Jeong suggests that contemporary hostility toward the [Family Federation](#) cannot be entirely separated from these historical experiences. In his [analysis](#), the [movement](#) has faced not only opposition to its beliefs and practices but also an additional burden arising from its Korean origins. The author implies that questions of national identity, historical memory, and cultural difference may have contributed to the intensity of public opposition directed toward the [organization](#) in Japan. Jeong writes,

“During the period of Japanese colonial rule, the religious traditions and ethnic religions maintained by Koreans in Japan as a means of preserving their identity were likewise far from welcomed. Furthermore, after the Meiji Restoration [1868], the state established the State Shinto system, imposing an emperor-centered religious order on the population and creating a

powerful culture of conformity through the alliance of religion and state power. The hostility now directed toward **Unificationism** cannot be separated from this historical and cultural context. In Japan, **Unificationism** has carried not only a religious stigma but also the additional burden of being perceived as a religion that originated in Korea.”

At the same time, the **column** argues that any historical assessment of the **Family Federation** should include consideration of both its positive and negative contributions. Jeong points to the participation of some Japanese members in anti-communist civic activism during the ideological conflicts of the 1970s. He also notes that **large-scale international marriages** involving Japanese and Korean participants have often been presented by supporters as contributing to people-to-people exchanges and reconciliation efforts between the two countries during periods of strained bilateral relations. While not dismissing criticism of the **organization**, the author cautions against reducing a complex **religious movement** to a single negative image without acknowledging other dimensions of its history.

The
article
further



highlights concerns that have been voiced outside Japan. Jeong cites observations made in reports on international religious freedom, including statements describing the dissolution effort as a departure from established practice because it relied on civil violations rather than criminal offenses. He interprets such comments as evidence that international observers view the case as having significance beyond Japan's domestic legal system. For the author, the issue touches on broader questions regarding the treatment of religious minorities and the limits of state authority over religious organizations. Reporter Jeong writes,

“In its **International Religious Freedom Report**, the U.S. Department of State described the Japanese government's request for the dissolution of the **Family Federation** as a “deviation from the norm.” The **report** noted that this was the first effort to dissolve a **religious corporation** on the basis of civil violations rather than criminal offenses. This demonstrates that the international community is closely monitoring the issue not merely as a domestic matter, but as one involving the universal principle of religious freedom.”

In its concluding sections, the **column** returns to the philosophical and historical meaning of religious freedom. Jeong argues that governments possess the power to dissolve legal entities and organizations, but they cannot eliminate personal belief or religious conviction. Drawing comparisons to the survival of religious communities under persecution in various historical contexts, he contends that faith traditions often endure even when institutional structures are dismantled.

The author concludes by predicting that the Japanese **Family Federation** will face substantial administrative and organizational difficulties as a result of the **court decision**, yet will continue to exist as a faith community. More broadly,

yet will continue to exist as a faith community. More broadly, he argues that the ultimate significance of the ruling will be determined not only by contemporary legal standards but also by future historical judgment. In his view, the central question that remains open is whether Japan's courts dissolved only a [religious corporation](#) or whether the decision also narrowed the scope of the religious freedom that democratic societies are expected to protect.

See also [Supreme Court Upholds Dissolution of Federation](#)

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Faith of Korean origins in Japan.

Illustration: ChatGPT, 25th June 2026, edited.

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