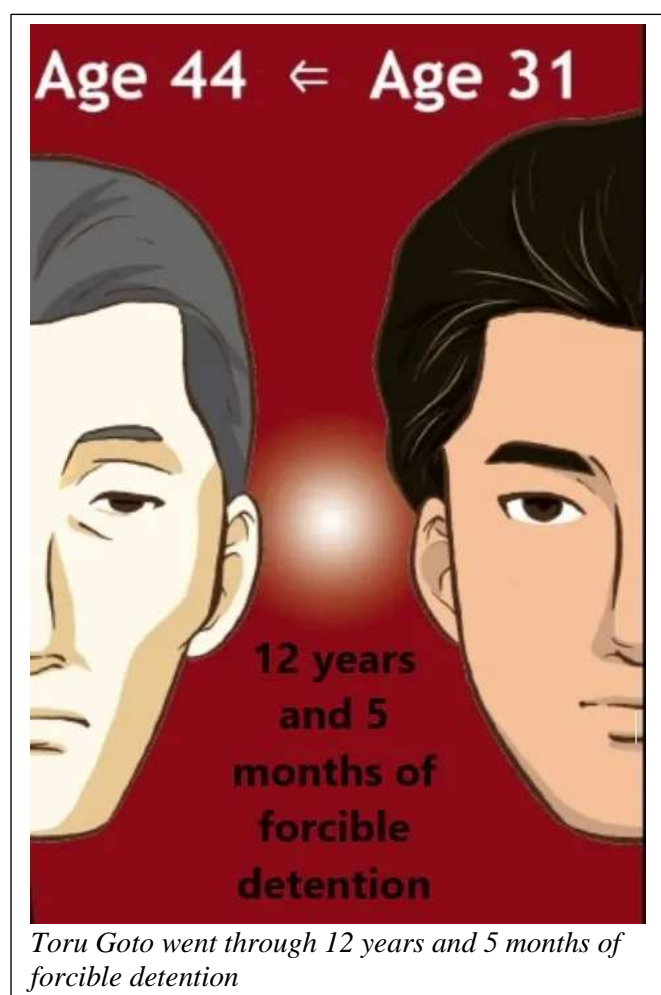


FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Toru Goto - Faith-Breaking in Japanese Apartment Prison

Knut Holdhus
August 15, 2025



English version of Toru Goto's new book: *Battle for Survival - 4536 Days in Captivity*



New book: English version of one of modern Japan's most disturbing human rights cases: The attempted faith-breaking of Toru Goto - locked up for over 12 years in apartment turned prison

[Review]

4536 Days in Captivity

Toru Goto's *Battle for Survival - 4536 Days in Captivity* is both a survivor's testimony and a meticulously documented chronicle of one of modern Japan's most disturbing human rights cases: the [abduction and prolonged confinement](#) of a man by his own family, under the guidance of professional "deprogrammers", in an effort to force him to [abandon his religious faith](#). Spanning [twelve years and five months](#) of captivity - 4,536 days - followed by seven years of legal battle, Goto's account is an unflinching examination of coercion, the corrosion of trust, and the resilience of belief under extreme pressure.

The book opens with the stark image of photographs from court records - dim rooms, cracked glass, worn tatami - taken from the very [apartment](#) in central Tokyo where Toru Goto (後藤徹) was hidden away for over a

decade. This framing sets the tone: evidence and memory intertwined, each reinforcing the reality of an ordeal that might otherwise seem unbelievable. The crime, formally recognized in Japanese courts, is not set in a distant war zone or a remote prison, but in the midst of an ordinary city neighborhood, just minutes from a bustling train station.

Goto begins by introducing his family - respectable, educated, middle-class. His father, a successful corporate executive; his mother, a gentle and devoted homemaker; his siblings, capable and supportive. The warmth of his childhood - family outings to fish in Okutama, the comfort of his mother's cooking - stands in tragic contrast to what would come later. This contrast is deliberate: it challenges any easy assumption that such extreme acts can only be committed by "bad" or obviously unstable people.

The turning point comes in the mid-1980s when Goto's older brother encounters the [Unification Church](#) (now called the [Family Federation](#)) and introduces him to it. Initially skeptical, Goto finds in the [church's](#) teachings a sense of purpose and hope that answers deep personal doubts. Within a year, all three siblings

are members, and for Goto, the faith becomes a central part of his life. But as membership grows nationally, so does opposition - from both theological rivals and political adversaries, some of whom adopt the controversial practice of "[deprogramming](#)" through [abduction and confinement](#).

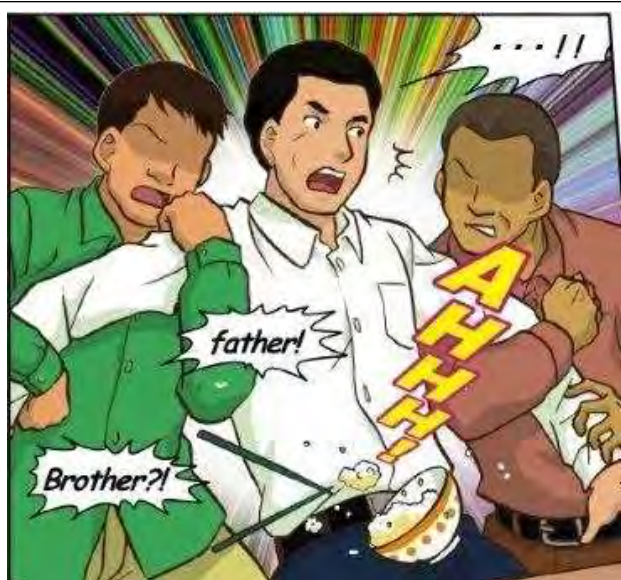


Illustration Of Toru Goto being [kidnapped](#) in order to [coercively break his faith](#)

What follows in Chapter 1 is a gradual tightening of the net. Goto's brother is the first to vanish, [seized and confined](#) under the direction of anti-[Unification](#) activists. Later, Goto himself is lured by his father to what he believes will be a meeting, only to be locked in a "connecting room" at a luxury hotel and subjected to verbal assaults from deprogrammer Takashi Miyamura (宮村峻) and former believers. Though he eventually escapes, the experience teaches him that physical force is not the only danger - psychological pressure and isolation can be equally devastating.

The book's middle sections describe the intricate network behind these [deprogrammings](#): pastors, ex-members, and laypeople coordinating to coach families on how to lure, restrain, and "rehabilitate"

relatives. Goto investigates the history of these efforts, linking them to broader political movements of the Cold War and to the media-fueled moral panic over "new religions" in Japan. This is one of the book's strengths: it is not simply memoir, but also a sociological record of a particular moment in Japanese religious politics, where anti-communist activism, theological disputes, and sensationalist journalism converged to legitimize extrajudicial coercion.



Faith-breaker: pastor Yasutomo Matsunaga of the Niitsu Evangelical Christian Church

The most harrowing part of the narrative begins in September 1995, when, after years of cautious contact with his family, Goto is abducted again - this time with meticulous planning and the clear intent of prolonged confinement. He is taken to an apartment in Niigata, its doors and windows secured with heavy locks, where his captors, including his parents and siblings, rotate to maintain constant watch. Here, professional deprogrammer Pastor Yasutomo Matsunaga (松永堡智) begins a campaign of criticism, ridicule, and theological challenge designed to break Goto's faith.

The conditions are psychologically punishing: total isolation from news, friends, or any outside contact; daily verbal assaults; the manipulation of family bonds to induce guilt. Former members are brought in to model "successful" departures from the [church](#). The aim is not merely intellectual persuasion but emotional exhaustion - an erosion of identity through relentless pressure. Goto, drawing on years of mental preparation and prayer, resolves to resist. His strategy is pragmatic: to feign doubt, endure the attacks, and wait for a genuine chance to escape.

Through these pages, the reader feels the claustrophobia - not only the physical confinement but the narrowing of mental space under constant surveillance. Goto's detailed descriptions of the [apartment layouts](#), lock mechanisms, and routines emphasize how control is engineered down to the smallest detail. His earlier experiences at the "Cat-dog apartment" and Ogikubo Glory Church had taught him that opportunity could come unexpectedly - during a supervised outing, or in a moment when vigilance lapses.

The narrative also follows the collateral damage: his younger sister's abduction, his fiancée's disappearance into a similar "rehabilitation" process, the complicity of police who dismiss such incidents as "family matters". Each case reinforces a core theme - that the social and legal environment of the time allowed these [abductions](#) to continue largely unchecked.

Goto's eventual release is not the end of the story. The final sections shift from survival to legal and moral vindication. He files civil and criminal complaints, navigating a legal system often reluctant to confront the intersection of family autonomy and individual rights. His victories in district and high courts, and the ultimate affirmation by the Supreme Court, are presented not as personal triumphs alone but as precedents for the protection of religious freedom and personal liberty in Japan.

The analysis that emerges from Goto's account is layered. At one level, it is a study in endurance - the

inner resources required to survive long-term captivity without capitulating to psychological manipulation. At another, it is an exposé of a quasi-organized system of [coercive faith-breaking](#), involving religious leaders, lay operatives, and family members, operating in a grey zone tolerated by public opinion and law enforcement. At yet another, it is a meditation on the fragility of trust: how quickly shared history and affection can be weaponized when belief systems clash.



Protesting against the evil of deprogramming (faith-breaking) in Shinjuku, Tokyo 8th December 2024. Here, Toru Goto (後藤徹), representing the [National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Religious De-Conversion](#) (center), delivering a speech. The posters behind him carry pictures of Toru Goto hardly able to walk after more than 12 years of forcible confinement

Crucially, Goto resists casting his family as one-dimensional villains. He acknowledges their ordinariness, their earlier kindness, even their concern - however misguided - about his choices. This nuance invites the reader to grapple with the uncomfortable reality that extreme actions can emerge from love distorted by fear, disinformation, and social pressure. It also underscores the role of third-party instigators, whose influence and coaching magnify familial anxieties into acts of coercion.

From a broader human rights perspective, *4536 Days in Captivity* raises urgent questions about the balance between protecting individuals from perceived harm and respecting their autonomy. It challenges the idea that "family matters" should be immune from legal scrutiny when they involve deprivation of liberty. It also highlights the dangers of conflating theological disagreement with moral or mental unfitness.

For readers unfamiliar with Japan's religious landscape, the book serves as a valuable primer on the [Unification Church's](#) contested position, the cultural stigma attached to "new religions", and the ways in which public fears can be mobilized to justify rights violations. For those concerned with freedom of belief, it is a sobering reminder that such freedoms are only as secure as the willingness of institutions - and communities - to defend them consistently, even for unpopular minorities.

In the end, Goto frames his survival not in terms of stubbornness alone but of purpose: the conviction that faith, once freely chosen, should be defended as a matter of personal dignity. His testimony is offered not only to recount what happened to him but to stand with "those who are facing lonely and difficult battles in silence."

4536 Days in Captivity is thus more than memoir. It is a legal document in narrative form, a case study in psychological resilience, and an ethical challenge to societies that permit the erosion of rights in the name of protection. It invites empathy without demanding agreement on theology, and it leaves the reader with a lasting unease about how easily ordinary life can be turned into a prison when fear is given license over love.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Yonhap: Repeated Allegations Create Public Bias

- August 14, 2025
- Knut Holdhus



ALLEGATIONS
 INVESTIGATION
 RAIDS
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In coverage of raids on main opposition party, South Korean Yonhap News Agency displays blatant bias emphasizing unproven allegations, not obvious lack of evidence

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On

13th and 14th August 2025, *Yonhap News Agency* published two articles detailing actions by South Korea's special counsel team investigating former first lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), with mention of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the *Unification Church*).



국민의힘

PEOPLE POWER PARTY

Logo of the People Power Party (PPP), currently the main opposition party in South Korea.

The reports describe raids on the main opposition *People Power Party* (PPP – 국민의힘)

headquarters as part of a probe into alleged bribery, political interference, and illegal political donations. Central to the narrative is the claim that a *federation* official, alongside an individual described as a "shaman" linked to Kim, sought to have *federation* members join the PPP to sway its 2023 leadership race.

The first article (13th Aug.) outlines the scope of the investigation: prosecutors allege that Jeon Seong-bae (전성배), a shaman associated with Kim, and a *Family Federation* official surnamed Yoon exchanged text messages about the support of then-President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) for PPP lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동).



PPP lawmaker **Kweon Seong-dong** (권성동), here 23rd Dec. 2024. Photo: 국민의힘TV / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp. Cropped



Former South Korean President **Yoon Suk-yeol**, here in a meeting at the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., 27th April 2023. DoD photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Alexander Kubitza / US Secretary of Defense. License: CC Attr 2.0 Gen. Cropped

They allegedly coordinated to influence the party leadership contest in Kweon's

favor and that Yoon sought government backing for the *federation*. Prosecutors also allege Yoon provided political funds to Kweon and others since 2021. Both Kweon and the *Family Federation* have publicly denied any illegal transactions or donations.

The second article (14th Aug.) details how the special counsel failed to obtain the PPP's membership list during the raid, encountering strong resistance from the party. The investigators reportedly intended to cross-reference party rosters with *federation* membership records to confirm mass sign-ups, but deny seeking

the entire membership list. Again, both Kweon and the *Family Federation* maintain their denials of any wrongdoing.

From a media bias perspective, the 13th August piece by Yonhap is what is called "front-loaded". Within the first two sentences, the article identifies the *Family Federation* in connection to a bribery probe and political interference.

The same can be said for the 14th August report. Again, early in the article, the *federation* is linked to "allegations" about influencing PPP's leadership race.

Early placement of the *federation* in proximity to "bribery," "raid," and "interference" primes the reader to associate the institution with misconduct before denials are presented.

The *federation's* denial of illegal donations in the 13th August article appears in paragraph 8 – similar for the article *the day after* – well after several paragraphs of allegations.

FATES OF SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENTS

- Syngman Rhee (in office 1948-1960) – **Exile in Hawaii until death**
- Yun Bo-seon (1960-1962) – **Convicted of treason**
- Park Chung-hee (1963-1979) – **Assassinated**
- Choi Kyu-hah (1979-1980) – **Forced out by coup**
- Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988) – **Death sentence, pardoned**
- Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993) – **Jailed, pardoned**

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Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) – **Son jailed**
Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) – **Aides investigated**
Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) – **Suicide during probe**
Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) – **Jailed, pardoned**
Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) – **Impeached, jailed, pardoned**
Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) – **Aides probed**
Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2025) – **Impeached, removed from office**

South Korea has a long, almost uncanny pattern of post-presidency trouble – enough that some Koreans joke there’s a “curse” on the Blue House. Each new administration often tries to “clean house” by prosecuting the previous one. The presidency in South Korea has immense influence, making both abuse and backlash more likely. This has created a cycle: leaders push legal or moral boundaries while in office, then political opponents pursue them once they step down.

Readers may retain the stronger emotional impact of initial allegations rather than later denials.

The sequencing of the two Yonhap articles ensures the reader is repeatedly reminded of allegations, while the absence of new evidence is given less narrative weight.

Across both articles, several key phrases are repeated, such as “church official”, “mass sign-ups”, “bribery allegations”, “influence the leadership race”

Even without proof, repetition helps cement these associations in the reader’s mind. In media framing theory, this is known as availability bias – people recall repeated terms more readily, increasing perceived likelihood of truth.

The articles technically maintain journalistic caution with words like “allegedly,” but their structure, selective details, and framing lean toward presumption of institutional involvement.

Analysis

These reports highlight an investigative narrative that risks conflating allegation with established fact, while relying heavily on prosecutorial claims rather than independently verified evidence. Several points are important to understand the real situation:

1. Absence of Proven Illegality

The reports repeatedly acknowledge that the *Family Federation* has denied making any illegal donations or providing improper political support. At this stage, the investigation appears to rest largely on testimony from individuals under arrest or investigation, such as the “church official” and the shaman. In criminal proceedings, such testimony is often scrutinized for bias, self-preservation motives, or plea-bargaining incentives. Until corroborated by independent, material evidence, these remain unproven allegations.

2. Lack of Direct Evidence in Media Reports

Neither article cites direct documentary or forensic evidence showing that the *Family Federation* as an institution orchestrated political interference. References to text messages are made in passing without providing transcripts or context, and there is no confirmation that such communications were authorized or coordinated by *federation* leadership. Without such proof, claims risk being perceived as guilt by association.

3. Potential Political Context and Sensitivities

The alleged events involve high-profile political figures – the former first lady, a sitting lawmaker, and a past president – making this a politically charged investigation. In South Korea’s contentious political climate, accusations of political interference by religious groups can be weaponized for partisan advantage. The *federation* has historically been a subject of public and media scrutiny, sometimes amplifying unverified claims due to pre-existing narratives.



*Initiated politically charged investigation against opponent: **Lee Jae-myung**, President of South Korea since 4th June 2025. Photo: Jeonnam Provincial Government / Wikimedia Commons. Public domain image. Cropped*

4. Mass Membership Sign-up Allegation Remains Unsubstantiated

The *second article* makes clear that the special counsel failed to secure the PPP’s membership roster, meaning they have not

obtained the very data needed to confirm or disprove the alleged mass sign-ups by [federation](#) members. This underscores that, at present, the accusation remains speculative rather than evidence-based.

5. **Importance of Distinguishing Individual Actions from Institutional Policy**

Even if individuals linked to the [federation](#) acted in ways that prosecutors consider questionable, it does not automatically implicate the [organization](#) as a whole. Many large religious or civic groups have members who engage in political activity independently. Without proof of formal directives from the [federation's](#) governing bodies, assigning institutional culpability is unwarranted.

6. **Risk of Prejudicial Public Perception**

The repeated mention of the [Family Federation / Unification Church](#) in conjunction with bribery and corruption allegations – without equivalent emphasis on the denials and lack of evidence – may shape public opinion before any judicial determination. For fairness, reporting should balance allegations with the presumption of innocence.

Conclusion

The Yonhap reports illustrate the early, contested stages of an investigation, not the conclusion of a proven case. While prosecutors are pursuing leads involving individuals with alleged [federation](#) ties, no conclusive evidence has been presented showing institutional wrongdoing by the [Family Federation / Unification Church](#). Until such evidence emerges and withstands legal scrutiny, the [organization](#) can rightly maintain that it has not engaged in illegal political donations or interference. In the meantime, it is crucial to distinguish between allegations against individuals and the policies or actions of the [institution](#) itself, especially in a politically charged environment where reputations can be damaged long before courts render judgment.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Featured image above: *South Korean Politics: HQ of People Power Party (PPP) being raided by special prosecutors. Illustration: Grok xAI, August 2025. Edited.*

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