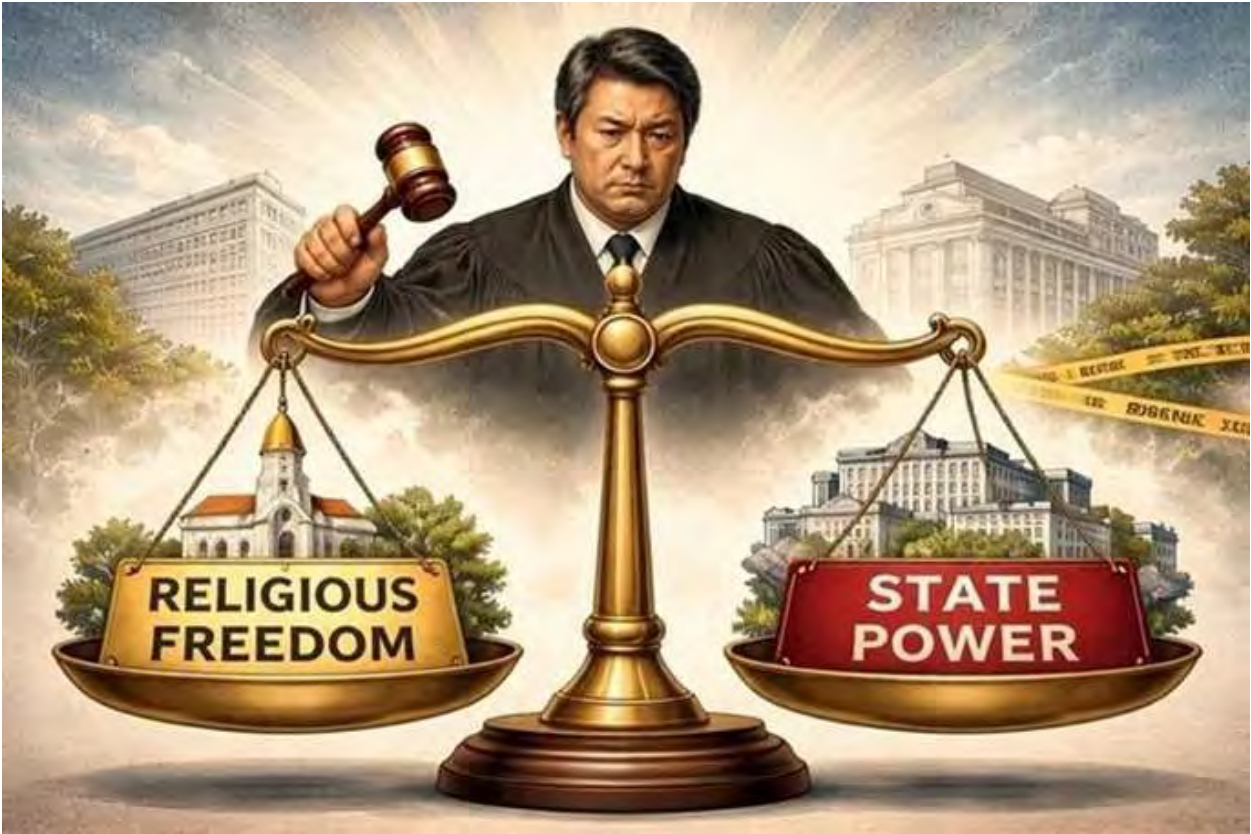


FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: No Justice in Japan, Is Any Faith Safe?

Knut Holdhus
March 5, 2026



세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)

Tokyo High Court ruling 4th March: Dangerous Japanese democratic experiment to let civil liability be sufficient ground to dissolve large minority faith by court order

[Religion column]

Japan's Rule of Law Put to the Test by Court-Ordered Dissolution of Religious Corporation



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

"[Japan's Rule of Law Put to the Test by Court-Ordered Dissolution of Religious Corporation](#)" was the headline of an opinion piece by religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) on 4th March. The writer describes a major [legal decision](#) in Japan the same day that has reignited debate about religious freedom, state power, and the meaning of the rule of law in a democratic society.

See also ["Loss of Appeal Part of Systemic Persecution"](#)

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The [Tokyo High Court upheld](#) a [lower court ruling](#) ordering the dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - better known for some as the former [Unification Church](#). With that decision, the [organization](#) moved one step closer to losing its legal status as a religious corporation in Japan, a process that would ultimately lead to the liquidation of its assets and the effective termination of its institutional existence.

[This ruling](#) is extraordinary. In modern Japan, the dissolution of a religious corporation by court order is extremely rare. Globally, it is also unusual for a democratic state to take steps that effectively extinguish a large religious organization through judicial action. For these reasons, the case has drawn intense scrutiny from legal scholars, human rights advocates, and observers of religion-state relations both within Japan and abroad.

At the center of the controversy is a fundamental legal question: On what grounds can a state dissolve a religious organization? In this case, the government's request for dissolution was not based on a criminal

conviction against the [organization](#) itself. Instead, it relied on findings of civil liability - specifically, unlawful acts under civil law related to the [group](#)'s activities, such as controversial fundraising practices. Critics argue that dissolving a religious corporation without a definitive criminal judgment sets a troubling precedent.



The building housing Tokyo High Court and Tokyo District Court (2012)

Under constitutional democracies, freedom of religion is considered a core civil liberty. In Japan, as in many other countries, this freedom is explicitly protected by the constitution. Dissolving a religious corporation does not formally ban belief, but it strips the [organization](#) of its legal personality. That means it can no longer own property as a corporate entity, operate in the same structured way, or benefit from the legal and tax frameworks granted to recognized religious bodies. In practical terms, it can dismantle the institutional foundation that sustains a faith community.

For that reason, many legal theorists argue that dissolution should be a "last resort", reserved for situations in which a religious organization

has been clearly and conclusively proven to have committed serious criminal acts as an organization. The [Segye Ilbo article](#) contends that in this case, that threshold was not met. Instead of relying on finalized criminal verdicts, the [court decision](#) was grounded largely in civil disputes and broader social criticism. To some observers, this raises concerns that the judiciary may have been influenced - directly or indirectly - by public anger rather than adhering strictly to narrow legal standards.



No more access to hundreds of its own buildings: Here, the property housing the [Family Federation](#) in North Hamamatsu, a city on the South coast on the main island of Honshu, Japan

The broader social context is impossible to ignore. The immediate catalyst for the Japanese government's actions was the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三). The man accused of the crime reportedly harbored deep resentment toward the [Unification Church](#), blaming it for his family's financial hardship due to large donations made by his mother. In the aftermath of the assassination, intense public scrutiny fell upon the [organization](#), especially regarding its fundraising methods and its connections to politicians.

However, critics of the [dissolution order](#) argue that the assassin's motivations were personal and subjective. They emphasize a foundational

principle of modern law: individual responsibility. According to this principle, criminal liability attaches to the person who commits the act, not to a broader community that shares certain beliefs. To attribute the actions of one individual to an entire religious body, they argue, risks reviving a form of "collective responsibility" that modern democratic systems have long rejected.

This concern is not merely theoretical. If a religious organization can be dissolved primarily because of public outrage connected to a crime committed by someone not a member of the faith, it raises the question of where the limits of state power lie. Could other minority groups - religious or otherwise - face similar action if they become unpopular or associated, fairly or unfairly, with social harm?

Some international observers have warned of what they describe as a potential "domino effect". If broad and somewhat ambiguous standards such as "harm to the public interest" or "antisocial behavior" are interpreted expansively, governments may gain wide discretion to act against groups that diverge from mainstream opinion. The concern is not limited to this particular religious movement. Rather, it touches on a structural issue within democratic governance: the balance between majority sentiment and minority rights.

In classical constitutional theory, the rule of law is not simply the enforcement of popular will. Instead, it functions as a constraint on power, including the power of the majority. Courts are expected to serve as guardians of legal principle, protecting even unpopular minorities from arbitrary or disproportionate state action. The [Segye Ilbo article](#) suggests that the Japanese judiciary now faces a profound test: whether it will be seen as upholding neutral legal standards or as aligning itself with prevailing public emotions.

Another dimension of the debate concerns the role of media and digital information ecosystems. The [article](#) references reporting that suggests online narratives, social media amplification, and possibly politically motivated information campaigns intensified negative perceptions of the group. In the contemporary information environment, emotionally charged content can spread rapidly, shaping public opinion before detailed legal processes unfold. If courts operate in a climate saturated with such narratives, critics worry that judicial neutrality may be difficult to maintain - even unintentionally.

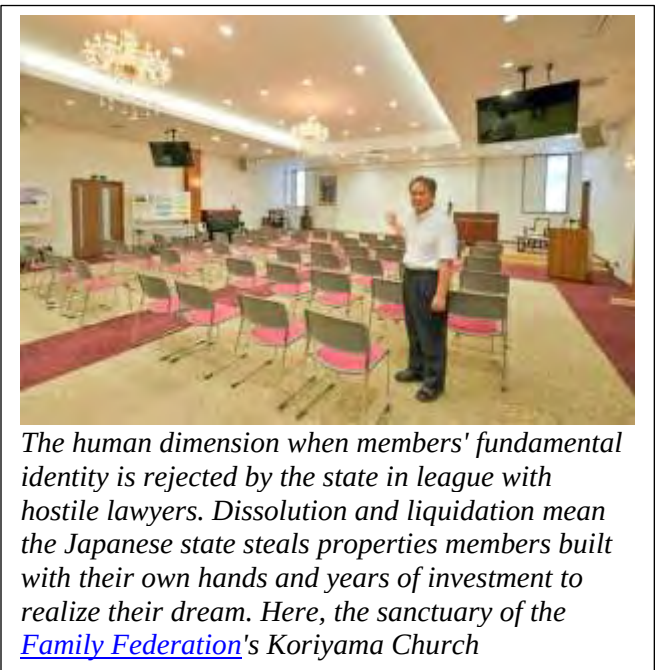


Will the Jehovah's Witnesses, another persecuted religious minority in Japan, be next? Here, a female believer at a street display for Jehovah's Witnesses in Naha City, Okinawa, Japan January 13, 2025

Beyond institutional and constitutional theory, there is also a human dimension. Tens of thousands of adherents in Japan identify with the [Family Federation](#) as their spiritual community. For them, the dissolution of the religious corporation is not merely a legal abstraction. It threatens the stability of their [places of worship](#), organizational networks, and long-standing communal ties. Even if individual belief remains protected, the dismantling of the institutional framework can feel like a profound repudiation of their identity.

Supporters of the [court's decision](#) argue, of course, that the state has a duty to protect citizens from exploitative or harmful practices. They maintain that religious freedom does not provide immunity from accountability. The unresolved tension lies in determining how far that accountability should extend and what

evidentiary standard justifies the most severe organizational sanction available under law.



The human dimension when members' fundamental identity is rejected by the state in league with hostile lawyers. Dissolution and liquidation mean the Japanese state steals properties members built with their own hands and years of investment to realize their dream. Here, the sanctuary of the [Family Federation](#)'s Koriyama Church

The case is now expected to move to Japan's Supreme Court, where the final legal judgment will be rendered. At stake is more than the future of a single religious movement. The outcome will likely influence how Japan - and perhaps other democracies - interpret the relationship between religious liberty, civil liability, criminal responsibility, and state authority.

For non-Korean and non-Japanese observers, the controversy may seem distant. Yet the underlying questions are universal. When does the protection of society justify extraordinary intervention against a religious body? How should courts navigate intense public emotion following a national tragedy? And what safeguards ensure that the rule of law remains a shield for minority rights rather than a tool shaped by shifting political winds?

These are the issues that the [Segye Ilbo article](#) brings to the forefront - framing the [Tokyo High Court's ruling](#) not only as a domestic legal milestone, but as a defining moment in the ongoing global conversation about democracy, pluralism, and freedom of belief.

See also ["Loss of Appeal Part of Systemic Persecution"](#)

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March 4, 2026 • Knut Holdhus

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Japan creating large-scale human suffering, escalating discrimination, social ostracism, and vicious bullying for members of large religious minority after deeply troubling verdict in violation of religious freedom

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Family Federation Dissolved Without a Single Criminal Conviction

Press release issued 4th March 2026 by the regional headquarters of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU) in Europe and the Middle East.



The headquarters building of the Family Federation in Japan, located in Shibuya, Tokyo. Photo: Asanagi / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

In a landmark – and deeply troubling – decision, the *Tokyo High Court* has today upheld the government’s order to dissolve the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU) in Japan, formerly known as the [Unification Church](#).

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Effective immediately, the [religious corporation](#) loses its legal status under Japan’s *Religious Corporations Act*. Compulsory liquidation of its assets can now proceed.

This marks an unprecedented milestone in Japan’s postwar constitutional era: For the first time, a major religious organization has been effectively erased as a legal entity – without any criminal conviction against the [organization](#) itself.

This is no routine administrative action. It is the harshest sanction available under Japanese law, stripping a faith community of its institutional existence. In rule-of-law democracies, such an extreme measure demands an extraordinarily high threshold of evidence and justification. Many legal scholars, human rights advocates, and international observers argue that threshold has not been met here.

No Crime Proven – Yet Institutional Death Imposed

The court found no criminal guilt on the part of the [Family Federation](#). Dissolution rests instead on allegations of harm to an undefined “public welfare” and breaches of loosely defined “social norms” – standards far below those required for criminal liability.

This sets a **dangerous precedent: a religious body can be dismantled administratively, based on civil claims spanning decades, without the rigorous proof a criminal trial demands.**

The Shadow of Tragedy and Political Pressure

The issue exploded into public view after the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The perpetrator, Tetsuya Yamagami, cited personal grievances tied to his family’s donations to the [church](#). The court rightly held Yamagami solely responsible, imposing a [life sentence](#). No evidence linked the [religious organization](#) to the murder.

Yet the ensuing media storm and political backlash created intense pressure. Within months, the government launched dissolution proceedings – a sequence critics describe as reactive

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rather than strictly legal.

Investigative journalist Masumi Fukuda has produced [groundbreaking reporting](#) that challenges key elements of the dominant narrative, pointing to media bias, selective evidence, and the marginalization of dissenting voices. Her work raises serious questions about whether full due process could prevail in such a polarized climate.



“We Have Committed No Crime”

[Family Federation](#) Japan President Masaichi Hori responded with resolve:

“We have not committed any crime as a religious corporation. Our members are sincere believers who practice their faith peacefully and strive to contribute positively to society. We deeply regret this extreme decision imposed without criminal conviction. We will continue to uphold our beliefs lawfully and peacefully, confident that truth and justice will ultimately prevail.”

Masumi Fukuda (福田 ますみ) – Japanese investigative journalist and award-winning nonfiction writer. Photo (2024): [Sekai Nippo](#)

Real People, Real Devastation

Beyond legal abstractions stand tens of thousands of ordinary Japanese citizens:

- Families who pray and build lives together
- Volunteers sustaining community service programs
- Children whose faith shapes their values and sense of belonging

Dissolution threatens:

- Government confiscation and forced [liquidation](#) of religious assets – properties, buildings, bank accounts
- Closure of worship spaces, [churches](#), [church cemeteries](#) and centers
- Transfer of ownership to the government
- Disruption – or outright end – of church-funded charitable, educational, and humanitarian work
- Heightened financial hardship and social instability for members
- Already, as a result of “trial by media”, hotels and other public facilities are refusing to rent space to us for our charitable activities.



Masaichi Hori (堀正一), President of the Family Federation in Japan. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Since 2022, believers have already endured escalating discrimination, [social ostracism](#), and – in some heartbreaking cases – vicious bullying of children. This ruling risks entrenching and amplifying that suffering, turning abstract legal loss into lived human hardship.

A Precedent That Should Alarm Every Democracy

Japan stands as a model of stable constitutional democracy, with robust protections for freedom of religion under its Constitution and Article 18 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR). These guarantees protect not only personal belief but the collective right of communities to organize, worship, and maintain legal existence.

When a religious group can be dissolved without criminal conviction – on grounds of vague “[public welfare](#)” claims – the precedent reverberates far beyond one organization. It tests the resilience of minority rights in any democracy.

As Mahatma Gandhi powerfully reminded us, the true moral

strength of a nation is revealed in how it treats its most vulnerable minorities.

The eyes of the world – and of history – are now on Japan's democratic institutions. Will they uphold the highest standards of religious freedom and due process, or will this ruling mark the beginning of a troubling erosion?

For more information: president@ffwpu-eu.org / ukdirector@ffwpu.org.uk

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Featured image above: The flag of the [Family Federation](#) waving in Japan. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

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