

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Volunteers Fail Japan's Religious Test to Pick up Trash

Knut Holdhus
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Cleanup activities conducted by the volunteer group "APTF Tokorozawa"



Japanese volunteer group loses city registration after 15 years amid concerns over affiliation to persecuted faith minority

Tokyo, 15th July 2026 - Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

Experienced Volunteer Group Excluded

Registration Not Renewed, Possibly Due to "Former Unification Church" Ties - Tokorozawa City

by Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

Cleanup Participants Say They "Feel Outraged"



Applications for registration in the environmental beautification program "Adopt Program" were accepted at Tokorozawa City Hall, Saitama Prefecture

Following the court decision [ordering the dissolution](#) of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)), criticism and scrutiny of the [religious organization](#) and its affiliated groups have intensified. The volunteer organization "APTF Tokorozawa," which had participated in an environmental beautification program run by Tokorozawa City (所沢市) in Saitama Prefecture, has been unable to continue as a registered participant since April.

After a Japanese Communist Party city council member raised concerns during a city council session last September, arguing that the group was affiliated with the [religious organization](#),

the city declined to renew APTF Tokorozawa's registration in the environmental program. The group's representative stated,

"I feel anger that a public institution is attaching a negative label to us."

Tokorozawa City operates an environmental beautification initiative called the "Adopt Program", through which the city supports citizen groups that clean roads, parks, rivers, and other public spaces. Participating groups receive supplies such as garbage bags and are covered by insurance against accidents that occur during activities. Organizations wishing to participate are registered by signing an agreement with the mayor regarding their activities.

APTF Tokorozawa, a branch of APTF (Association for the Promotion of a True Family Movement - 真の家庭運動推進協議会), which is described as an association affiliated with the [religious organization](#), began monthly cleanups of station areas and parks in May 2009. It joined the Adopt Program in 2010 and had carried out activities without issue for more than fifteen years.

According to representative Masami Soma (相馬正美), most participants are members of the [religious organization](#), but the activities are not intended for proselytizing or religious purposes, and no complaints about the group have ever been reported to the city.

Influenced by a Communist Party Council Member

However, APTF Tokorozawa became a topic of discussion at a Tokorozawa City Council session in September of last year.

Kenta Hanaoka (花岡健太), a member of the Japanese Communist Party city council group, referred to the objectives stated on APTF's website and emphasized that the association seeks to realize ideals based on the teachings of [Sun Myung Moon](#) and his [wife](#). He pointed out that the Adopt Program's guidelines require participating groups not to engage in political or religious activities and argued that APTF Tokorozawa "may be in serious violation of these guidelines".

Hanaoka further stated that the group may have "conducted recruitment activities while concealing its true identity" and that "it is absolutely unacceptable for the government to effectively endorse associations related to the former [Unification Church](#)."



Japanese APTF volunteers

In March of this year, Tokorozawa City's Road Maintenance Division informed Soma that the volunteer group's registration could not be renewed. Soma requested a written explanation of the reasons for non-renewal, but the city declined to provide one.

Believing there was no problem with submitting an application itself and wishing to hear a fuller explanation, Soma submitted another application to city hall in April. At that time, he again requested a written explanation, but a city official responded:

"We appreciate your activities. However, the Adopt Program is a private agreement between the city and participating organizations. If the city unilaterally expresses its intention not to continue the agreement, that is sufficient. We understand that you may not accept this, but there is no need to disclose the reasons."

When Soma asked whether the registration had been denied because APTF was affiliated with the [Family Federation](#), the official replied that:

"Based on its website, APTF appears to have strong ties to the former [Unification Church](#)," and

that "it is difficult for Tokorozawa City to determine whether it is a religious organization."

At the same time, the official maintained that:

"The city is not refusing to continue the registration because it is related to the former [Unification Church](#)."

Officially, the city's position is not that the decision was based on a particular belief system, but rather that the organization possesses a "strong religious character" that may conflict with program guidelines. Soma said he felt this reflected an attitude of avoiding responsibility by leaving matters ambiguous instead of clearly stating them in writing.

In June, Soma received a voicemail message from the city stating that, following review, "the agreement (registration) cannot be continued."

Excluding "Ordinary People"

APTF Tokorozawa also included participants who were not members of the [religious organization](#). A man in his fifties who lived in Tokorozawa until June said that he joined the activities knowing that the group was affiliated with the [religious organization](#).

"When you actually participate in cleanup activities with them, they are just completely ordinary people. Those who have negative images of the [Family Federation](#) are probably people who have never interacted with current members."

Regarding the refusal to renew the volunteer registration, he added:

"If there had been a written notice terminating the registration, I could have sent a protest email to the mayor as an ordinary citizen. But it is difficult to protest something that exists only as a phone call and leaves no formal record."

Soma said:

"Even though our registration was not renewed, we are continuing our cleanup activities. We want to treat this as a new beginning."

At the same time, he expressed concern that:

"This kind of exclusionary movement could spread to other regions. I feel there is prejudice not only against the [Family Federation](#) but against religious activities themselves. The government should have exercised greater caution in making such decisions."

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Media Turning Public Opinion Against A Minority

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[Part 2 (final) of interview with author Fumihiko Kato]

Places of Worship Are Integral to Religious Freedom

Four Years Since the Assassination of Former Prime Minister Abe

by Yoichiro Miyata (宮田陽一郎)

Human Rights Trampled with the Media as an Ally

Interviewer: Yoichiro Miyata (宮田陽一郎)

See part 1 of the interview: [Using Abe's Assassination Against Unificationism](#)

– There was little media coverage of “second-generation religious believers” during the 1980s and 1990s.



Author Fumihiko Kato (加藤文宏) being interviewed. Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

The events of the 1980s and 1990s were essentially scandals surrounding well-known public figures. Those watching were little more than spectators gawking at the commotion.

See also [Lawfare: State Uses Legal System in War on Faith](#)

This time, however, anonymous people identified as second-generation religious believers [\[See editor's note below\]](#) brought forward issues that were fundamentally family disputes, yet they were presented as though they were universally true and representative of all such cases. As a result, society developed suspicions such as, “Could my own family become like that?” or “Will I be deceived the moment I step outside my home?” Once such suspicion takes root, it is very difficult to dispel. It spread into criticism and distrust directed at then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (岸田文雄), members of his cabinet, and Diet lawmakers.

– On 4th March, the Tokyo High Court upheld the dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the Unification Church), and on 22nd June the Supreme Court finalized that order. The religious organization’s facilities are now under the control of court-appointed liquidators, and members can no longer freely use them. How do you view this situation?



Initially, attorney Masaki Kito (紀藤正樹) and journalist Eito Suzuki (鈴木エイト), among others, argued that a dissolution order would merely strip the [religious organization](#) of its tax privileges. In reality, that was not the case.

Article 1 of the *Religious Corporation Act* reads as follows:

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Masaki Kito, one of the hostile lawyers of National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (全国霊感商法被害対策弁連) and Nationwide Unification Church Damage Countermeasures Legal Team (全国統一教会被害対策弁護団). Photo: Screenshot / [Bitter Winter](#)

institutions.”

In other words, places of worship are inseparable from the freedom of religion itself.

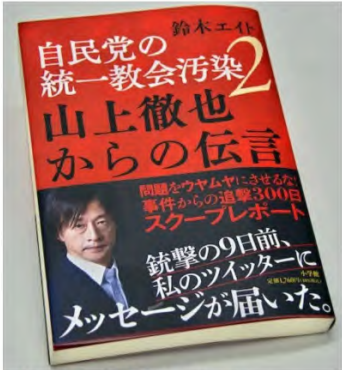
The three essential elements of a state are said to be territory, people, and sovereignty. If a [religious organization](#) can no longer use its facilities, isn't that analogous to a nation losing its territory? The government, politicians, and even the judiciary have never seriously reflected on religion. They speak of religious freedom, but they have never truly considered what religious freedom actually means.

A person's freedom of conscience cannot be violated. However, simply allowing someone to hold religious beliefs does not by itself mean that freedom of religion is guaranteed. Freedom of religion is inseparable from the ability to engage in real-world religious activities, such as worship in churches, temples, mosques, and other places of worship. The failure of the government, politicians, the judiciary, and society to recognize this was the real problem.

– What impact do you believe the [dissolution order](#) against the [Family Federation](#) will have on Japanese society going forward?

The issuance of the [dissolution order](#) has created an atmosphere in society suggesting that the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) has now been settled and brought to a close. I find that extremely strange.

Corporations Act begins by stating: “The purpose of this Act is to enable religious organizations to own, maintain, and administer places of worship and other property...” Article 2 defines a religious organization as one that possesses “places of worship, such as shrines, temples, churches, monasteries, and similar



Eito Suzuki – keen to publish the terrorist's message: The cover page of the book in Japanese by activist journalist Eito Suzuki titled “The LDP's Unification Church Contamination 2: A Message from Tetsuya Yamagami” (Shogakukan)



A Japanese woman offering a donation at a meeting. A hostile group of lawyers used consumer laws and coined the term “spiritual sales” on donations given to religious organizations and try every trick to label donors as

“victims”. *Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 10th February 2025.*

Another issue is how the grounds for the [dissolution order](#) kept shifting. At first, the issue was reframed as one concerning the relationship between religion and politics. Then it became about religion and [consumer disputes](#). Eventually, it was reframed again as an issue of religious freedom. As a result of these successive changes in justification, it ultimately came to be accepted that, because Mr. Abe had been shot and killed, it was only natural for the [Family Federation](#) to be dissolved. Isn't that an extremely serious matter?

Deliberate changes (人為的にすり替え) in the framing of the issue created a particular climate throughout society, politics, and the judiciary.

As a result, members of the [Family Federation](#) have become targets of violations of their fundamental human rights. Some find themselves [unable to hold funerals](#). They are subjected to [discriminatory treatment](#) and have been [excluded from society](#). This social climate has produced those outcomes. This has left a precedent demonstrating that, even without amending the Constitution or any laws, it is possible to bring about such [violations of human rights](#) simply by winning the mass media to one's side.

See also [Believers' Social Exclusion, Loss of Civil Rights](#)

For someone like me, who has observed this issue without being a member of the [Family Federation](#), the lesson is, “Tomorrow it could be me.”

I am not engaged in advocacy saying, “The [Family Federation](#)'s teachings are wonderful. Let's all make donations.” Rather, I simply say, “These are the facts, and this is what is happening in society.” Yet even for doing that, I have been excluded from the world of public commentary and the media. The [social exclusion](#) of people who are not even members has already begun.

Take the issue of foreign nationals, for example. It goes without saying that discriminating against foreigners is wrong. But there are also foreigners who come to Japan under circumstances that are not well understood, fail to follow Japanese law, and create social disorder. It is also true that if someone attempts to report on those cases, they are liable to be excluded.

If the media and politicians set events in motion, and the judiciary ends up legitimizing judgments, I would consider mistaken, then it becomes entirely possible for people who seek to communicate certain viewpoints to be excluded from society. I genuinely feel that danger. And I believe there is no doubt that this will happen again.

See part 1 of the interview: [Using Abe's Assassination Against Unificationism](#)

See also [Lawfare: State Uses Legal System in War on Faith](#)

Featured image above: Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto representing the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) respond to reporters after the [Tokyo High Court's decision](#) ordering the [religious organization's](#) dissolution, 4th March 2026, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

[Editor's note: The term 宗教2世 (*shūkyō nisei*, literally “second-generation religious believer”) 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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