

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Kishida Follows Anti-Family Federation Minister

Knut Holdhus
October 12, 2023



Anti-Family Federation minister central in seeking court order

Several Japanese papers reported 12th October that the Japanese authorities will seek a court order to dissolve the [Family Federation](#). If the court rules as the government wishes, the [Family Federation](#) would lose its religious corporation status. It is expected that the Tokyo District Court will receive the court order already on Friday 13th October. Although the district court will reach a verdict within months, the entire legal process could last for several years.

the japan times The Japan Times reports 12th October

that members of the [Family Federation](#) made a last minute appeal to the authorities by submitting signatures from 53,499 members urging the Japanese leadership not to go for a dissolution order. The paper quotes a statement

from the petitioners,



"If an actual order is issued (by the court), all assets, including real estate such as church worship facilities and training centers, will be confiscated and liquidated, resulting in a significant limitation on the freedom of religious activities for followers."



Journalist Makoto Fukatsu wrote in the Mainichi Shimbun, Japan's oldest paper and one of its largest, on 11th October that

"from the perspective of ensuring the legitimacy of the request, the ministry would like to proceed with the procedure after obtaining the approval of the council members [Council of Religious Corporations]."

And the ministry did consult with the council before making its decision. But not everyone on the council agreed that the request to the court is legitimate. In another article the same day, the Mainichi published a statement by one of the members of the Council of Religious Corporations, who expressed his concern that purely political motives may well be behind the current process initiated by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The council member points out, "the dissolution order is a 'death sentence' against a religious corporation, and the request for dissolution should follow a careful procedure."

He emphasized that political intentions could be involved, saying,

"We do not want to be influenced by the political agenda. Politics tries to use what it can"

Mainichi explains that the obvious reason for Kishida's actions against the [Family Federation](#) is that the government is hoping that the dissolution request will lead to an increase in support.

Many are in fact wondering why Prime Minister Kishida is in a hurry to get the dissolution order. Little has been written about that in the Japanese media. One who has made a good analysis of the situation, is Kazuhiro Aoyama, political journalist and part-time lecturer at the private distance learning university Seisa. In an article in the weekly business and finance magazine Toyo Keizai (Oriental Economist) 17th October 2022, he asks the question,

"Why did Prime Minister Kishida, who remained cautious about the dissolution order from the viewpoint of 'freedom of religion', change his policy in a hurry?"

The answer, according to Aoyama, is connected to one leading politician within the Kishida administration, Taro Kono, Minister for Digital Transformation and Minister for Consumer Affairs and Food Safety since August 2022, just after the Abe assassination. Aoyama explains,

"On August 8, at his first press conference since taking office as minister, Kono announced the establishment of a study group on the issue of the former Unification Church in the Consumer Affairs Agency. Two days after the Cabinet reshuffle, it was a lightning-fast move without instructions from Prime Minister Kishida."

The Toyo Keizai article points out that Kishida considered Kono a key player to win over public opinion in the aftermath of the terror attack on Shinzo Abe. But Prime Minister Kishida "had concerns about his arbitrary and exclusive actions. When Prime Minister Kishida heard about the launch of the study group, he asked the people around him if they were okay."



Masaki Kito

One worrying point for Kishida and members of the Consumer Affairs Agency, was the fact that Kono appointed Masaki Kito, an activist radical leftwing lawyer who had been campaigning against the [Family Federation / Unification Church](#) since a long time. But Taro Kono insisted on Kito's inclusion in the agency and did not want to reconsider it when faced with criticism.

Although Aoyama does not mention it, it turns out that Kito and Kono have a long history together. Taro Kono himself, along with his father Yohei Kono, a leading LDP politician for many years, and leftwing Masaki Kito - all friendly towards China - were vehemently fighting the espionage prevention bill that Abe and other LDP politicians had tried to introduce. An organization founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) called Victory over communism (VOC) was actively supporting the introduction of the anti-espionage legislation. Since then, Kono has had a rather cold relationship to the [Family Federation](#).

Taro Kono is a contender for the LDP leadership, but is by many considered a political maverick, even eccentric.

Featured image above: Taro Kono 15th August 2022. Photo: デジタル庁. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int.](#)
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4 leading experts ask Japanese government to stop witch hunt

Four academics and human rights activists, who are leading experts on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), wrote on 14th June 2023 a letter to the Japanese government, urging it to stop the current witch hunt and protect the rights of the [Unification Church / Family Federation for World Peace and Unification \(FFWPU\)](#), a religious minority that has been targeted by anti-cult activist lawyers. On 3rd July, [Bitter Winter](#), the online magazine for religious liberty and human rights, published the [letter](#).

In it the four experts



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– Willy Fautré, Ján Figel, Massimo Introvigne, and Aaron Rhodes – “call for an end to what increasingly appears as a witch hunt”.

The **letter** argues that the rights of **FFWPU** are denied by stigmatizing it as a “cult”, an expression used to demonize and persecute minorities. On 12th December last year, the European Court of Human Rights agreed that words like “cults” “should not be used in official governmental documents”.



Massimo Introvigne.
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Likewise, the experienced four experts, point out that the concept of “brainwashing” is a “pseudo-scientific concept used to reinforce the discrimination between ‘good’ religions, which allegedly do not use brainwashing to convert their new members, and ‘bad’ ‘cults’, which supposedly do.”

Those very concepts have been used in Japan to justify thousands of cases of “the criminal practice of deprogramming, where adult members of certain religious minorities were kidnapped, illegally detained, and submitted to various forms of violence until they gave up and agreed to abandon their faith.”



Bitter Winter published the letter

In their letter asking the Japanese government to put an end to the current witch hunt against the **Family Federation**, the four experts also emphasize that media and anti-religious groups often rely on statements by “apostate” ex-members in order to attack certain faiths.

“Apostate” refers to a small number of ex-members who become militant crusaders against the movement they left. Scholars have, however, often warned that “apostates” have an agenda and “are not representatives of the majority of former members of a religion”. The letter written by the four scholars states,

“As in other similar cases, the campaign against the **UC / FFWPU** relies heavily on a few apostate ex-members. One goes under the pseudonym ‘Sayuri Ogawa’ and has been heavily promoted by the anti-**UC** Network and even introduced to Japan’s Prime Minister. As it has happened with other apostates, in its crucial and essential points her story is demonstrably false [...]”



Front page book cover of Sayuri Ogawa's book in Japanese.

The four writers of the **letter** have serious objections to how the Japanese authorities are handling the attacks on the

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Family Federation,

“Relying on apostates such as Ogawa is an example of dubious procedural practices or even respect for natural justice that are of deep concern in this case. It seems to us that testimonies hostile to the UC / FFWPU are systematically privileged, that militant opponents of the religious movement are included in official commissions dealing with it, and different opinions and testimonies are not seriously considered.”

The **letter** from the European scholars is addressed to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, and Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology Keiko Nagaoka. It explains that since 1987, the attacks against the **Unification Church / Family Federation** have been orchestrated by National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. The **letter** describes the intention of those lawyers,

“There is a significant journalistic and scholarly literature demonstrating that most of the lawyers who established the Network were politically motivated. They wanted to punish the **Church** and another organization established by the same founder, the International Federation for Victory over Communism, for its anti-Communist activities and its effective support to anti-Communist and conservative politicians.”

In their witch hunt, the same network of activist lawyers has been campaigning for years for the removal of the **Family Federation's** religious corporation status. The four scholars point out that the conditions for such an extreme measure “are simply not there”. The religious body has never been “found guilty of any criminal wrongdoing”.

The network of lawyers has, however, actively supported the serious crime of deprogramming. The **letter** to the Japanese government says,

“This obnoxious and criminal practice was actively supported by anti-**Unification Church** lawyers and continued in Japan from the 1970s to the Supreme Court decision of 2015 on the case of Toru Goto, a Unification Church believer who was detained by his family and the deprogrammers for more than twelve years. The enormous amount of violence and suffering involved in deprogramming should always be considered [...]”



*Activist lawyers caused great damage and suffering to **Unification Church** members. Here Toru Goto after 12 years of forcible detention. Photo: FFWPU*

The experts on religious freedom also advise the Japanese authorities to learn from a similar witch hunt case in Europe in the 1980s,

“In a significant precedent, the British Government was unwise enough to base almost its whole case for the removal of the ‘charitable status’ (very similar to Religious Corporation Status in Japan) from The **Unification Church** in the United Kingdom, which it launched in 1984, at the behest of the ‘anti-cult movement’, on the testimonies of ‘apostates’ from the **Church**. Many of them had been subjected to having their faith forcibly broken by professional ‘deprogrammers’, and the great majority of them had been influenced by the anti-cult movement in the United Kingdom or in the USA.

When this phenomenon was exposed by lawyers representing the [Church](#), the government's case collapsed, and it was forced to withdraw it entirely and to pay the equivalent at today's prices of over USD 6 million in costs. The case also put an end to cooperation between the British government and anti-cultists and led to the decision to cooperate instead with academic scholars of new religious movements through an organization called INFORM."

The four European scholars urge the Japanese government to stop the witch hunt against the [Family Federation](#) and protect the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) of all religious groups,

"The international FoRB community is watching what is happening in Japan, which represents the most serious FoRB crisis in a democratic country of our century. We hope that all organizations that support and defend FoRB in Japan and internationally would support our appeal. The liquidation of the [FFWPU](#) as a religious corporation would be a measure comparable to the actions taken against several religious minorities in China and Russia, and unprecedented in a democratic country.

It would also expose Japan to considerable international criticism. What is more, should the Japanese government proceed with this action, it will give cover to assaults on religious groups by authoritarian and totalitarian states around the world, undermining efforts by international human rights institutions to protect religious liberty."

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Photo of Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology Keiko Nagaoka – license: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#).

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Read the [whole letter](#) in [Bitter Winter](#)

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