

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan's largest Buddhist Order claims anti-Unification Church case sets dangerous precedence

Knut Holdhus
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Soto Zen Buddhism Sojiji Head Monastery in Yokohama, Japan. Photo (2009)

Japan's largest Buddhist Order claims dissolution case sets dangerous precedence and could be illegal.

by Matthias Stephan

In a turn of events surprising to many, the Soto Zen order, the largest Buddhist organization in Japan with over eleven million followers, has raised concerns over the Japanese government's move to dissolve the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) as a religious corporation.

BITTER WINTER [Bitter Winter](#), the online magazine for human rights and religious freedom, reported on 14th March 2024 on the important decision by the large group within Japanese Zen Buddhism. See the [Bitter Winter article](#).



Soto Zen Headquarters and Tokyo Grand Hotel in Tokyo Minato-ku

In the report written by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, it is pointed out that despite Soto Zen's historical differences with the [Unification Church](#), the Zen order has questioned the legality of the dissolution case. Soto Zen argues that Japanese law traditionally mandates dissolution of a religious organization only in cases of criminal convictions, not civil disputes. This stance has drawn attention to potential constitutional violations regarding freedom of religion and could set a dangerous precedent for religious organizations across Japan.

The controversy arose following Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's abrupt shift in interpreting the Religious Corporations Act, suggesting that religious bodies could face dissolution based on civil cases alone. This sudden change has sparked widespread debate within religious circles and among legal experts.

At its 143rd Ordinary Session, the Soto Zen General Assembly faced internal pressure to reconsider its stance on the dissolution case. However, the head of the religious group, Hattori Shusei, affirmed that there are no plans to revise its position.

Introvigne writes that the dissenting viewpoint of Soto Zen has reverberated through religious communities, challenging the consensus among the members of the Council of Religious Corporations, which initially endorsed the dissolution request. Critics argue that targeting religious organizations based solely on civil disputes could infringe upon constitutional rights and undermine religious freedom in Japan.

While some individuals, such as Councillor Tetsuzu Jinno, have criticized Soto Zen's stance, accusing it of tacitly supporting the [Unification Church](#), it's essential to clarify that the large Buddhist group has not expressed approval of the organization now called the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). Rather, it has voiced concerns about potential violations of human rights and constitutional principles.



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, April 2023

As the case unfolds, the broader implications for religious freedom in Japan remain uncertain. The outcome of this legal battle will not only shape the fate of the [Family Federation](#) but will also set a precedent for how religious organizations are treated under the law, underscoring the delicate balance between state intervention and religious autonomy.

"Large Zen Group: 'Dangerous Precedence Set'" - text: Matthias Stephan

Bitter Winter, the publisher of the article, was established in 2018 as an online magazine focusing on religious freedom and human rights in China. Since December 2020, Bitter Winter has expanded its scope by introducing an international section dedicated to religious freedom issues worldwide. The magazine is published by CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, and is based in Turin, Italy. According to Bitter Winter, it started when scholars, journalists, and human rights advocates from diverse backgrounds joined forces and published news items, stories and personal testimonies about persecution against all faiths in China. Their collective aim was to amplify

the voices of the marginalized.

Dr. Massimo Introvigne, who penned the Bitter Winter article, is an Italian sociologist specializing in the study of religions. He is renowned as the founder and director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), a global network of scholars dedicated to researching new religious movements (NRMs). Introvigne boasts an impressive bibliography, having authored around 70 books and over 100 articles within the realm of sociology of religion. Notably, he played a pivotal role as the primary author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He holds positions on the editorial board of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and the executive board of *Nova Religio*, published by the University of California Press.

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State And Media Creating “Today’s Non-Citizens”

January 8, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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Japanese journalist exposes how government, media and public opinion effectively have made members into “non-citizens”

Tokyo, 5th January 2024 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper Sekai Nippo. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

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Non-Citizens”

Part 6 of an interview with Masaki Kubota (窪田順生), author of “Infiltrating the Former Unification Church”

by Seisaku Morita (森田 清策)

[Part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#), [part 4](#), [part 5](#), [part 7](#)

– **The government, media, and public opinion are creating a synergistic effect (相乗効果) [producing a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects], resulting in a “control of thought and religion” (思想・宗教統制) we are not aware of.**



Logo of the Sekai Nippo

I sense the beginning of fascism. First, they take away freedom of religion, then they take away freedom of speech. They don't suddenly impose a strict control, but gradually tighten it. After publishing the book, I realized that some people will be silenced if they are slammed by those around them. Then, the state will control them more and more. If the state decides, “Anything in this direction is good,” then anything other than what the state has decided becomes “anti-social”. I think this is the first step towards such a society.

If Prime

Minister Fumio Kishida says that from now on he will have no relations with socially problematic organisations, those taking a stance against the Liberal Democrats can continue to point out the social problems of other religious organisations, such as the Soka Gakkai [創価学会 – the new Buddhist movement on which the political party Komeito is based, the governing Liberal Democratic Party's coalition partner]. They can say, “Why do you declare you have cut ties with the former Unification Church (Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), but not with other religious groups?” It would not be a situation where they could form a coalition. It can be said that Prime Minister Kishida without thinking has destroyed the identity of the Liberal Democratic Party.



The Soka Gakkai International flag. Photo: QueerMichael / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 4.0 Int

Moreover, if we tamper with freedom of thought and religion, our society will become dreadful. They probably did it because they didn't think that far ahead and were afraid their approval ratings would drop. In addition, the officials of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (文化庁) had no choice but to file a request for a dissolution order because it was the Prime Minister's order, and the remaining part of their careers would be in jeopardy should they not obey.

What they did was to accumulate the stories of “victims” by going back in time. On the other hand, they did not listen to the stories of active believers. Normally, if there is a problem, one must first listen to the believers of the group that is thought to have a problem.

Instead of doing that, if they only listen to the stories of former believers who quit 20 years ago, and pile up all of that, saying “there is so much damage,” Soka Gakkai [創価学会 – the new Buddhist movement on which the political party Komeito is based, the governing Liberal Democratic Party's coalition partner] will also be in danger. The story is so far-fetched that it should be pointed out by the media. But on the contrary, they are pleased that “support” is overwhelming in public opinion polls. It's a terrifying situation where even extrajudicial matters are approved as long as everyone agrees.

– **In your book, the situation of the believers surrounded on**

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all sides (四面楚歌), is described as “today’s non-citizens” (令和の非国民).



From Japanese history: Flag used by the Righteous Army during the February 26, 1936 coup attempt. The four characters reading “Revere the Emperor, Destroy the Traitors” (尊皇討奸) are placed in the corners of a standard Japanese flag. Photo: Cckerberos / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#)

Believers might feel bad, but the term “today’s non-citizens” which I used, means they have become the same as renegades during wartime.

Those who were said to be non-citizens then, were not beaten up because of laws such as a “Non-Citizens Exclusion Act” (非国民排斥法). At that time, the media frequently

wrote articles about the war at a time when the fate of the Japanese people was at stake. As the stories of the soldiers were published in newspapers and broadcast on radio, the word “non-citizen” was spread, and ordinary people lynched those who opposed the war.

Indeed, now, believers from the former [Unification Church](#) are not lynched these days. However, they can't rent a hall, and they are told not to come to summer festivals, and they are treated like non-citizens. This is deeply related to the media reports and Prime Minister Kishida's declaration of cutting all ties.

– Even media people are afraid to meet today’s non-citizens.

After I interviewed Masayoshi Kajikuri (梶栗正義), chairman of *International Federation for Victory over Communism* (国際勝共連合), I suggested to my media acquaintances, “I’m going to introduce you, so why don’t you interview him and listen to his story?” However, they refused out of fear what he would do. They even said no to just meeting him and listen to his story.



Masayoshi Kajikuri (梶栗正義). Photo: IFVOC

The image that has been created is scarier than the reality. Many people think they can’t communicate with members. By publishing a book, I wanted to shatter that image. Followers might be talkative and have different values from you in some areas, but they are people with whom you can have a dialogue.

Continued in [part 7](#).

[Part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#), [part 4](#), [part 5](#), [part 7](#)

Featured image above: Masaki Kubota, Japanese author and journalist. Photo / graphics: Sekai Nippo.

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Masaki Kubota (窪田順生) is a non-fiction writer who has contributed to weekly and monthly magazines. He has also worked first as a producer, then as an advisor for TV-documentaries. He is journalist for a weekly magazine and a newspaper, and editor of a monthly magazine. In addition, he works as a media consultant, having conducted over 200 public relations consultations and media training sessions (training on how to handle interviews).

His books include

- "Spin Doctor – Techniques of Information Manipulation Used by Professionals Who 'Hush up Bad Information'" (Kodansha Alpha Bunko – 2009), which deals with Japan's political and corporate public relations strategies, and
- "14 Stairs – Reportage on the Niigata Girl's 9 Years and 2 Months Confinement Case" (Shogakukan – 2006), which won the 12th Shogakukan Non-fiction Award for Excellence.
- His new book, "Infiltrating the Former Unification Church – the Complete Story of the Request for a Dissolution Order and the Deepest Secrets of the 'No Good Coverage'", is currently on sale.



The front cover of 'Infiltrating the Former Unification Church' (潜入旧統一教会「解散命令請求」取材NG最深部の全貌 – Tankobon Softcover, Nov. 2023), by Masaki Kubota (窪田順生).

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