

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japanese Anti-Cult Activists Role in Abe Assassination

Knut Holdhus
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Shinzo Abe in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated

"Anti-cult" activists may have played a key role in influencing assassin Yamagami before assassination and portraying him as victim afterwards

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[Bitter Winter](#), the leading international online magazine dedicated to human rights and religious freedom,

published on 27th December 2024, the second installment in a four-part series authored by its

director-in-charge, Marco Respinti. The articles were based on a lecture series he presented in the four Japanese cities Hiroshima, Tokyo, Nagoya, and Fukuoka between 6th and 10th December 2024. These events were organized by the Japanese Committee of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF).



Marco Respinti speaking at a conference in Tokyo, Japan, December 8, 2024

In the second article, titled "[Made in Japan: No FoRB for the Family Federation. 2. Revamping the Debunked Notion of 'Cult'](#)", Respinti mentions the tragic assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍 晋三, 1954 - 2022). The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami (山上 徹也), was immediately apprehended at the scene and soon openly confessed to the murder during questioning by local police. Once Abe's death was officially confirmed, Yamagami faced formal murder charges. Over the subsequent months, additional accusations were brought against him, and as of 30th March 2023, the self-confessed assassin faced a total of four charges. He also risks the death penalty, although in similar cases in the past, such sentences have been commuted to life imprisonment.

Respinti explains that one particularly notable aspect of this case is Yamagami's claim that his act was not motivated by Abe's political affiliations, policies, or party. According to Yamagami, the assassination was in no way connected, directly or indirectly, to politics. Instead, he admitted to killing an innocent man and a prominent national leader purely out of deep resentment and hatred toward the [Unification Church](#) (now called the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)).



Assassin: Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan

Yamagami revealed that he initially intended to assassinate Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#), the widow of Reverend [Sun Myung Moon](#) and co-founder of the [Family Federation](#). However, he abandoned this plan due to the logistical challenges of getting close to her.

He instead targeted Abe, who was known to have expressed sympathy toward the [Family Federation](#). Yamagami himself was never a member of the [religious organization](#), but his mother was, and he claimed that her excessive donations to the [organization](#) drove her into bankruptcy. This financial ruin, he alleged, left him and his siblings in dire poverty, with one of his brothers eventually

taking his own life and Yamagami himself attempting suicide.



Paid the ultimate price: Shinzo Abe, here delivering a video message on September 12, 2021

In his [Bitter Winter](#) article, Respinti claims that now, more than two years after the assassination, several aspects of the case remain unclear. However, a significant issue is that while Yamagami has yet to stand trial or receive a sentence, the [Family Federation](#) has faced a barrage of accusations, as though it were responsible for the crime rather than being a victim. The [organization](#) is being targeted and penalized, while the true perpetrator was Yamagami alone. Abe paid the ultimate price with his life, the [Family Federation](#) is paying a steep price through public backlash, yet accountability for the heinous crime lies solely with the assassin. Despite this, the opposite seems to be unfolding.



Speaking at the same event as Shinzo Abe: Donald Trump delivering his video message 12th Sep. 2021 at Rally of Hope held in Gapyeong, South Korea

The situation is marked by a troubling logic, which Marco Respinti summarizes in four key points:

Yamagami was never a member of the [Unification Church](#) or the [Family Federation](#).

His mother declared bankruptcy in 2002. In response to complaints from her brother-in-law, two members of the [religious organization](#) returned 50% of her donations in installments.

Abe himself was neither a member of the [Unification Church](#) nor the [Family Federation](#), though he did receive support from members during elections. He participated virtually in a 2021 event and sent a message to a 2022 event

hosted by the Universal Peace Federation, an NGO founded by [Family Federation](#) leaders. Notably, prominent figures such as U.S. President Donald Trump and former European Commission presidents José Manuel Barroso and Romano Prodi have also participated in such events, alongside many other politicians across the ideological spectrum.

The timing of the assassination raises questions. Yamagami targeted Abe in 2022, even though his mother's financial difficulties stemmed from her bankruptcy two decades earlier, in 2002. While this does not implicate the so-called anti-cult movement directly, The Journal of CESNUR has documented Yamagami's participation in "anti-cult" online forums in recent years, which may have influenced his already unstable mind.

Given these factors, it is evident that the situation remains complex and murky. Some Western scholars have even suggested that Yamagami may be one of the most "successful" political assassins in modern history. His stated goal was to damage or even destroy the [Family Federation](#), and, unlike many political assassinations that fail to achieve their intended objectives, his actions have caused significant harm to the [organization](#). However, this success is built on a foundation of lies.

Marco Respinti emphasizes that he is not a prosecutor and does not wish to preempt the findings of any court of law in Japan. His role here is that of an observer and reporter. The Italian religious freedom authority describes Yamagami's claims as "lies" because his accusations against the [Family Federation](#) are demonstrably false in many ways. For the sake of truth and clarity, Respinti believes it is essential to examine the flawed reasoning that led the assassin to such a misguided conclusion.



Marco Respinti delivering his message in Tokyo December 8, 2024

Yamagami's crime was rooted in the belief that the former [Unification Church](#) - and by extension, politicians who showed sympathy toward it - deserved punishment for his mother's financial decisions. He considered the [church](#) an "evil cult". While the former [Unification Church](#) has long been labeled a stereotypical "cult" by the international anti-cult movement, this definition does not hold up under scrutiny. Even so, this rhetoric has influenced public perception, particularly in Japan, where the anti-cult movement has gained significant traction.

Respinti describes how in Western academia, courts, and some quality media, the use of discriminatory terms like "cult" has largely been abandoned. This shift is reflected in a landmark ruling by the European Court of Human Rights on 13th December 2022, in the case *Tonchev and Others v. Bulgaria*. The court ruled that governments and local authorities cannot use stigmatizing terms like "cult" in official documents or campaigns, as this constitutes discrimination and may incite violence. Unfortunately, this progressive perspective has yet to gain traction in Japan. There, authorities continue to use such terminology, perpetuating the stigmatization of religious minorities.

In light of these considerations, the fallout from Abe's assassination highlights not only the tragedy of his death but also the broader issues surrounding the treatment of religious minorities in Japan. The continued targeting of the [Family Federation](#) underscores the dangerous consequences of stigmatization and the need for a more nuanced and balanced approach to such matters.

Text: Knut Holdhus

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Made in Japan: No FoRB for the Family Federation. 2. Revamping the Debunked Notion of “Cult”

12/27/2024 MARCO RESPINTI

A+ | A-

Most scholars have abandoned a word that has no definition and no borders. It is used only as a derogatory term to stigmatize “the other.” Yet, in Japan it is still current.

by Marco Respinti*

Article 2 of 4. Read [article 1](#).

“Under the title “The Crisis of Religious Freedom and Democracy in Japan,” this paper was presented in different versions at conferences organized and hosted in December 2024 by the [International Coalition for Religious Freedom \(ICRF\) Japan Committee](#) and constituting a lecture tour in Japan that brought the author to speak at [Bunka Koryu Kaika](#), in Hiroshima, on the 6th, at [Tokyo City Vision Center](#) in Tokyo Kyobashi on the 8th, at [Niterra Civic Hall](#) in Nagoya, on the 9th, and at [ACROS Fukuoka](#), in Fukuoka, on the 10th.



Marco Respinti speaking in Nagoya, December 9, 2024.

The [Unification Church](#) is a new religious movement, founded in South Korea in 1954 by Rev. Moon Sun Myung (문선명, 1920–2012). It has known an important success in this country, Japan, among many others. Particularly after another and different religious group called [Aum Shinrikyō](#) perpetrated several crimes, including a lethal terrorist [attack with sarin gas against the Tokyo subway in 1995](#), new religious movements, and sometimes religions and religion in general, are perceived by many Japanese as a problem rather than as a resource.

Those criminal acts by Aum Shinrikyō sparked a sentiment of general hostility against those creeds that are defined—maliciously or for an unbearable ignorance—as “cultic,” “fanatic,” and chronically connected to the idea of violence, even if in most cases those groups are totally peaceful. This is particularly true for new, not well-known, or small religious groups or spiritual schools, even if the three adjectives I just used may not always be present. In fact, a “new religion” can be a small group even if it is well-known, and the reverse is true as well.

New, not well-known, or small religious groups are often also referred to as “cults.” Social agitators part of the so-called anti-cult movement insist their campaigns are against “cults” only. But the fact is, this is not always true. Sentiment against religion in general may well begin by addressing “cults,” but it is soon generalized, and this because “cult” itself is a problematic concept. It is not a scientific word, and most scholars refrain from using it. Indefinite in its meaning and borders, it complicates things rather than simplifying them. What does distinguish in fact a “cult” from a “legitimate” religion? Who draws the line, and based on which criteria? Can a set of laws, a code, or a secular state enter into the complex and sometimes complicated theologies, liturgies, and histories of groups whose mentality they barely understand?

The use of the word “cult” is in fact always derogatory and serves to label rivals or people that an individual or an organization or an institution or a state dislike. It indicates always “the other” and is cast on people and groups without

any proof. In sum, a "cult" results always to be what the person, organization, institution, or state using that word against a religious or spiritual group make that word mean.

Also, "cults" are accused of "brainwashing" to control their "victims," but also this notion has been widely rejected as pseudo-scientific by the vast majority of scholars who study new religious movement in the West, and by courts of law in the U.S. and other countries. Yet, this does not seem to be generally known in Japan, as not very well known is also the opposition by a large part of the scholarly community to the "anti-cult" narrative prevailing in the media. In fact, in Japan there is no parallel to that reaction, as most scholars of religion are afraid to jeopardize their careers by being associated with "cults," as it happened to some of them who had naively supported Aum Shinrikyō.

It is also important to note that the anti-cult movement in Japan was not born in a vacuum. For historical reasons I have no time to elaborate on here, since the French Revolution, French governments have been suspicious of religion in general and of religious minorities they see as difficult to control in particular.



Joseph-François Schwebach (1769–1823), "A church desecrated and looted during the French Revolution." Credits.

There are governmental agencies in France whose mandate is to fight "cults" and even to promote the anti-cult ideology internationally. "The Journal of CESNUR" has noted that these agencies and Japanese lawyers hostile to "cults" started meeting since the last decades of the past century. We have also documented, by publishing inter alia the excellent works by Japanese investigative journalist Fukuda Masumi, that these lawyers were not only motivated by greed and by the perspective of easy money to be made by suing "cults." Most of them were Socialists and Communists and they wanted to target one specific new religion that had been successful in Japan with its anti-Communist campaigns, the Family Federation, then called the Unification Church.

I return now to Prime Minister Abe's sad assassination. Immediately arrested on the scene, Yamagami, the killer, soon overtly confessed his murder to the local police. When Abe was officially declared dead, Yamagami was formally accused of murder. As more accusations against him were brought forth in the following months, as of March 30, 2023, and up to this day, the total charges against the self-confessed assassin reached the number of four. He risks also the death penalty, even if in similar previous cases it was commuted into life imprisonment.

One element is quite noteworthy here. The killer Yamagami has made clear that he had nothing against Abe's political orientation, ideas, or party, and did not assassinate him for any reason directly or indirectly, openly or secretly, connected to politics. Yamagami said he had killed an innocent man and a prominent leader of this country, whether or not one is sympathetic to his political view and policies, only and manifestly out of his deep resentment and hate for the Unification Church/Family Federation.

He in fact underlined that he had been previously trying to kill Dr. Moon Hak Ja Han (한학자), the widow of Reverend Moon and the co-founder of the Unification Church, only to later decide to give up because of the difficulties in getting close enough to her. So, he turned to Abe, a politician known to be sympathetic to the Unification Church. Yamagami was never a member of the Unification Church, but his mother was and is. Yamagami claimed that because of her excessive donations to the Church her mother went bankrupt, and this condemned him and his siblings almost to starvation, pushing his brother to commit suicide and him to attempt it.

After more than two years from that murder, many shadows remain on the case. But the key element here is that, as a result, while the assassin still remains with no trial and sentence, the FF has been overloaded with accusations, as if it were the perpetrator rather than the victim. The FF is being punished, not the criminal. Abe paid a high price, the FF is paying a high price, but the villain was solely the assassin. No one else but him should be made accountable for that heinous crime. Yet, as I said, the contrary is happening.

The whole thing displays a twisted logic, that can be summed up into four main points.

First, let me repeat that the assassin was not and had never been a member of the Unification Church or the Family Federation.

Second, his mother declared bankruptcy in 2002. After her brother-in-law complained, two Church members returned in installments 50% of the donations.

Third, Abe was not a member of the Unification Church/Family Federation either, although many FF members

undoubtedly supported him and voted for him in the elections. He did participate by remote to a 2021 event, and sent a message to another event in 2022, of the Universal Peace Federation, an NGO founded by the leaders of the Unification Church. But so did Donald Trump, two times president of the United States, former European Commission presidents José Manuel Barroso and Romano Prodi, and dozens of other politicians of all persuasions. I have attended myself similar events where I listened to the speeches and messages of politicians of different leanings.

Fourth, why did the assassin kill Abe in 2022 when his mother declared bankruptcy twenty years before, in 2002? While I am certainly not blaming the anti-cult movement for the crime, "The Journal of CESNUR" has also documented that in the last years before the assassination Yamagami started participating in anti-cult Internet fora, which may have excited his feeble mind.



Yamagami is arrested after his attack against Abe. Screenshots.

In the face of these elements, the least one can say is that this is a cloudy situation.

Those four points makes it clear that Yamagami, the killer of Abe is, as some Western scholars have suggested, one of the most successful political assassins in history. His stated aim was to create trouble for and possibly destroy the Family Federation. While many political assassinations backfire, and the criminals do not achieve their aims, so far Yamagami is being remarkably successful. Of course, he is successful because he clouds his crime with several lies.

I am of course not the prosecutor of Yamagami, not intend to be. I do not want to anticipate any court of law of this honorable country. I just try to do my work as an observer and a reporter. I just used the word "lies" because Yamagami's claim on the supposed guilt of the FF is evidently false, a fact that can be demonstrated in many ways. For the sake of our argument today, and above all for the sake of truth, I want to indulge for a moment now in the mental mechanisms that brought the assassin to his wrong conclusion.

As said, the assassin committed his criminal act having decided that the Unification Church and even politicians who showed some sympathy to it needed to be punished because the church's doctrines and teachings led his mother to a specific behavior he condemns. Basically, the assassin thinks that the Unification Church/Family Federation is an evil "cult."

It is certainly true that for the international anti-cult movement that defined the word, the Unification Church was the quintessential and even stereotypical "cult." Definitions of "cults" we may find in dictionaries do not apply to the FF. But this is, while interesting, politically irrelevant since the anti-cult movement has hijacked the world, including in Japan, and has imposed its own definition and its list of "cults" to the media.

In the West, the academia, courts of law, and at least some quality media have abandoned this derogatory and discriminatory terminology. This does not seem to be the case in Japan. On December 13, 2022, radically modifying its previous case law, in the decision "Tonchev and Others v. Bulgaria," the European Court of Human Rights stated that governments, national and local, cannot use the word "cult" and parallel expressions in other languages to stigmatize religious minorities in official documents and campaigns, since this is inherently discriminatory and may even generate violence. Again, as far as I know, this decision that created great international interest has rarely been discussed or even mentioned in Japan. In this country, it seems that the authorities continue on the dangerous path of stigmatizing religious minorities by calling them "cults" or "anti-social" organizations.

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Marco Respinti

Marco Respinti is an Italian professional journalist, member of the [International Federation of Journalists \(IFJ\)](#), author, translator, and lecturer. He has contributed and contributes to several journals and magazines both in print and online, both in Italy and abroad. Author of books and chapter in books, he has translated and/or

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