FFWPU Europe and Middle East: 2025 Dissolution, Abe's Legacy, Japan's Liberal **Democratic Party Ties and Assets**

Knut Holdhus May 17, 2025



From a demonstration for religious freedom in Shibuya, Tokyo May 4, 2025

Swedish academic on how 2025 dissolution order against the Family Federation stirs debate over religious freedom, political entanglements, and the "plundering of the coffers" of a religious organization that has committed no crimes

An article by Dr. Ernils Larsson, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Multidisciplinary Research on Religion and Society (CRS) at Uppsala University in

Sweden, in East Asia Forum (EAF) 3rd May 2025.

East Asia Forum (EAF), an online publication and quarterly magazine known for its high editorial standards, published on 3rd May 2025, an article titled "The Unification Church dissolution and Japan's evolving religious governance". It is written by Ernils Larsson, a Swedish scholar specializing in the intersection of religion, law, and politics in postwar Japan.

Dr. Larsson points out that the ongoing case in Japanese courts against the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, formerly known as the Unification Church, raises significant concerns about the limits of religious freedom in Japan



Sign outside Tokyo District Court

The article describes the Tokyo District Court's landmark decision on 25th March ordering the dissolution of the Family Federation, following what Larsson calls decades of controversy surrounding the <u>organization</u>'s alleged use of so-called "spiritual sales" - a term coined by activist lawyers using consumer law to claim the return of donations, often given many years ago to the religious organization which until 2015 in Japan was called the Unification

Church.

Larsson writes that the Family Federation has appealed to a higher court and claims that the organization may reestablish itself in another legal form, what he calls, "may continue operating under a different form," and "The Church can still move its assets to a friendly corporation and carry on its activities mostly as before."



As source for such claims, Larsson gives an UCA News (Union of Catholic Asian News) article from 10th April. There, Katsuomi Abe, Union of Catholic Asian News one of the activist lawyers campaigning against the Family Federation,

is quoted as saying that the **Unification Church** in 2009 "felt a sense of crisis and took preemptive measures." UCA News wrote that the church "decided to transfer any assets remaining after the Church's dissolution to Tenchi Seikyo [See editor's note below], a group based in Obihiro City".

What Larsson fails to mention, is that in the same article Masaki Kito, a leading activist lawyer in the

network working to dissolve the <u>Family Federation</u>, and regarded by many as the chief architect behind the government's dissolution case, stated at a press conference on 27th March that "remaining assets could be calculated only after the victims are compensated."



Lawyers from National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS) at press conference after dissolution verdict March 25, 2025. From left: Katsuomi Abe, Hiroshi Yamaguchi, Masaki Kito

And the network of lawyers is doing its best to inflate claims from so-called victims as much as possible, so that what is left after those claims are settled are only token amounts. On top of that, the same Kito is campaigning that funds should be held back for possible future claims. A likely scenario may well be that next to nothing will remain after the activist lawyers have "plundered the coffers" of the Family Federation.



<u>Sun Myung Moon</u> and Nobusuke Kishi, Prime Minister of Japan 1957-1960, shaking hands in Tokyo

The Swedish academic describes that the Unification Church has been active in Japan since the end of the 1950s. Throughout its history, it had close connections with conservative politicians, especially from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Founded by Sun Myung Moon, who was known for his vehement anti-communism, the church aligned ideologically with the LDP, particularly during the Cold War era. According to Larsson, this alignment facilitated cooperation in political campaigns, with the church often providing volunteers and logistical support in exchange for political goodwill.

Japan's Constitution, enacted in 1947, forbids public officials from engaging in religious activity but does not restrict religious organizations from participating in politics - as long as they do not exert direct political authority. This legal framework allowed the Unification Church members to campaign for

conservative lawmakers without officially breaching constitutional boundaries. However, in the wake of the Abe assassination, the sensationalist media thrust the extent of this partnership into public view. This prompted then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to announce the severance of ties between the LDP and the federation.

Ernils Persson points out that it was only with Abe out of the way that a relentless media and activist campaigners spurred the government to take formal action against the <u>Family Federation</u>.

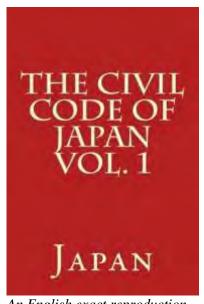
Until recently, Japanese authorities were hesitant to intervene in religious matters due to the strong legal protections enshrined in Japan's postwar Constitution. These protections have traditionally ensured a high degree of autonomy and privacy for religious organizations. Japanese courts have often sided with religious individuals even when their beliefs conflicted with societal norms. Notable rulings include protections for Jehovah's Witnesses who refused blood transfusions or abstained from school martial arts training.

However, according to Larsson, public attitudes toward religious groups began to shift dramatically after the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack carried out by Aum Shinrikyo, another religious organization. That

attack exposed the dangers posed by fringe religious movements operating under the legal protections granted to religious corporations. Following the incident, public support for increased oversight of religious groups grew stronger, and tolerance for newer religious movements, such as Soka Gakkai and Jehovah's Witnesses, began to erode.



Front page of 2018 English version of Religious Corporations Act of Japan.



An English exact reproduction of The Civil Code of Japan, vol. 1, 4th edition, first published

Despite increased scrutiny, the Japanese government retains significant discretion in handling religious corporations under the Religious Juridical Persons Law. Court-ordered dissolutions of religious groups remain rare. Aum Shinrikyo was the first to face such a fate, with its dissolution confirmed by the Supreme Court in 1996. Since then, only two more groups - the Myokakuji in 2002 (due to criminal fraud convictions) and Dainichizan Hokekyoji in 2006 (after a civil dispute) - have faced dissolution through legal action.

Larsson writes that the legal path taken is what makes the <u>Unification Church</u> case notable. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) - responsible for registering national religious corporations - filed the suit under Japan's Civil Code, not through criminal prosecution. This marks the first time a government body has sought the dissolution of a <u>religious organization</u> without pursuing accompanying criminal charges, placing the case in a legal category similar to that of Dainichizan Hokekyoji.

While Japan's Constitution upholds religious freedom, this right is not absolute. The Swedish academic emphasizes that Article 12 of the Constitution specifies that civil liberties must align with the public welfare. Likewise, Article 81 of the Religious Corporations Act allows for the dissolution of religious organizations that cause significant harm to society. This framework mirrors international norms, such as Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Japan has adhered to since 1978.

The Tokyo court's decision has provoked concern among religious freedom advocates and <u>Family Federation</u> representatives, who argue that the ruling sets a troubling precedent. They warn that it could threaten the autonomy of other religious groups.

East Asia Forum (EAF), established in 2006, is a prominent English-language platform dedicated to delivering expert analysis and commentary on political, economic, and policy developments across the Asia Pacific region. The publication operates under the auspices of the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University (ANU) and is a joint initiative of the East Asian Bureau of Economic Research (EABER) and the South Asian Bureau of Economic Research (SABER).

Ernils Larsson serves as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Multidisciplinary Research on Religion and Society (CRS) at Uppsala University in Sweden. His current research project, titled "From Secular Institution to Religious Organization: Shrine Shinto in Postwar Japan", is funded by the Swedish Research Council.

Larsson earned his PhD in the history of religions from Uppsala University's Faculty of Theology. Larsson's expertise makes him a valuable contributor to discussions on the complex relationship between religion and state in contemporary Japan.

Text: Knut Holdhus

[**Editor's note:** Tenchi Seikyo (天地正教), translating to "True Teachings of Heaven and Earth," was founded in 1987 by Kawase Kayo as the Spiritual Stone Worshippers Club. In 1988, it was reorganized and officially registered as a religious corporation under Japan's Religious Corporations Law. The group venerates a pure white marble statue of the Seated Maitreya (Miroku Bosatsu), aligning with certain Buddhist traditions. According to researcher Thomas H. Pearce, as of 1994, Tenchi Seikyo reportedly had approximately 111,000 members across 73 centers throughout Japan.]

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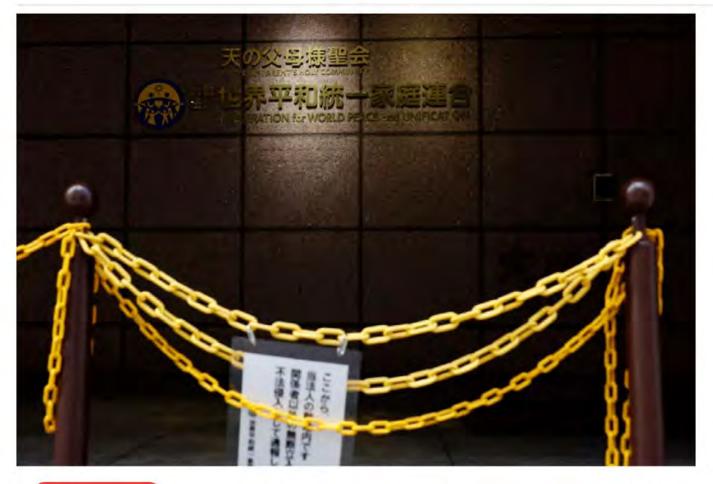
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IN BRIEF

In March 2025, the Tokyo District Court ordered the dissolution of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification — formerly the Unification Church — following decades of controversies surrounding its business practices and 'spiritual sales'. While the Church has appealed the decision and may continue operating under a different form, the ruling raises broader questions about the boundaries of religious freedom in Japan.













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On 25 March 2025, the Tokyo District Court <u>ordered the dissolution</u> of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly the Unification Church). The ruling is the latest development in a decades-long dispute between the Church and disenfranchised former members — which became widely known in Japan following the assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe in 2022.

The Unification Church has operated in Japan since the late 1950s. For most of this time, it has maintained a working <u>relationship with conservative politicians</u>, particularly within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Church founder Sun Myung Moon was fiercely anti-communist and the Church's antagonistic view of left-wing political groups survived the end of the Cold War. This was the foundation for the Church's collaboration with LDP lawmakers.

Under Article 20 of <u>Japan's 1947 Constitution</u>, public officials are prohibited from carrying out any 'religious activities', but there is no ban on religious organisations engaging in politics, provided they do not 'exercise any political authority'. In exchange for their continued goodwill, the Unification Church supported conservative lawmakers during election campaigns, including by providing a reliable supply of volunteers. It was this decades-long partnership that was <u>brought to light</u> after Abe's assassination and which forced then-prime minister Fumio Kishida to publicly <u>distance the LDP from the Church</u>.

At the same time, <u>public awareness</u> grew of the various charges of bad practice aimed at the Unification Church and its affiliates, particularly its business practices and '<u>spiritual sales</u>'. Though controversies around these practices go back to the 1980s, it was only after Abe's assassination that <u>public pressure</u> forced the government to consider legal action against the Church.

The government's reluctance to take legal action against the Unification Church until 2022 stemmed from Japan's strong constitutional protections for religious freedom, which have historically limited state intervention in religious affairs. Under the postwar Constitution, the Japanese state has maintained a principled distance from religious actors, allowing religious organisations a high degree of autonomy and privacy. Japanese courts have tended to hand down rulings in favour of the religious freedom of individuals who deviate from common norms, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses' right to abstain from blood transfusions or refusal to partake in Kendo practice in school.

The attitude of the Japanese state changed after the new religious group <u>Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas</u> in the Tokyo subway in 1995. When it became known that the group had used its status as a religious corporation to plan and carry out these activities in secret, support increased for greater government oversight of religious organisations. This coincided with a general shift in the public perception of 'new' religions, as <u>public tolerance</u> for groups such as Soka Gakkai and Jehovah's Witnesses waned.

But the state still maintains a high degree of discretion in its relationships with organisations registered under the Religious Juridical Persons Law. Aum Shinrikyo was the first to be dissolved through a court order, upheld by the Supreme Court in 1996, and the three decades since have seen only two more such incidents. In 2002, the Myokakuji group was dissolved after its leaders were convicted of fraud and in 2006, the Osaka High Court upheld a decision to dissolve the religious corporation Dainichizan Hokekyoji following a civil lawsuit involving a dispute between private actors.

The lawsuit seeking the dissolution of the Unification Church was filed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, which registers nationally active religious corporations. Unlike the Aum Shinrikyo and Myokakuji incidents, the lawsuit was <u>brought under Japan's Civil Code</u>. Though this places the case in the same category as the Dainichizan Hokekyoji case, it is the first time that a public organ has initiated the dissolution of a religious corporation without pursuing.

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Religious freedom in Japan is not without conditions. Article 12 of the Constitution provides that all fundamental freedoms must be utilised for 'public welfare'. This is echoed in <u>Article 81</u> of the Religious Corporations Act, which stipulates the conditions under which religious corporations can be dissolved. This includes when a corporation is responsible for actions that 'significantly cause harm to public welfare'. It is worth noting that such conditions can also be found in <u>Article 18</u> of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Japan has been a signatory of since 1978.

Representatives of the Unification Church and religious freedom activists have voiced concerns over the Tokyo District Court's ruling, claiming it undermines religious freedom in Japan. Yet it is worth emphasising that the organisation has not been prohibited from carrying out activities in Japan. Religious corporations are awarded certain privileges, including tax-exempt status, but no law in Japan forces organisations to register with the state. The Church can still move its assets to a friendly corporation and carry on its activities mostly as before.

Following the ruling, legal representatives of the Church vowed to appeal the decision to the Tokyo High Court. Hence, it is too early to conclude what effect the decision will have in the long run. But the old ties between the Unification Church and conservative lawmakers will likely continue to trouble the LDP leadership for the foreseeable future.

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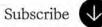
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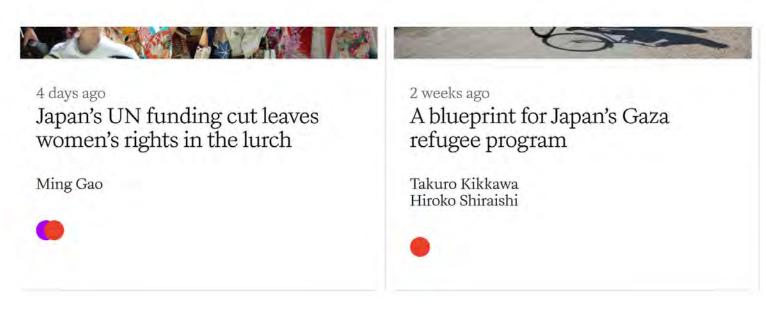




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