FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Japan's Government Sued for Religious Abuse

Knut Holdhus
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Japan sued by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Illustration: ChatGPT

Sekai Nippo

As the Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan has sued the state, rushed policy on religion and child abuse faces backlash being accused of bias

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[Editorial] "Religious Abuse" Lawsuit

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's Q and A Should Be Withdrawn

by the editorial board of Sekai Nippo

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's Q and A guidelines on "child abuse related to religious beliefs" (so-called "religious abuse") have faced strong criticism since their publication for allegedly promoting prejudice and discrimination against religion. A lawsuit has now been filed against these guidelines. At this point, the government should withdraw them.

Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare

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The plaintiffs seeking confirmation of invalidity of the guidelines and compensation from the state are the religious organization Jehovah's Witnesses and 20 of its members. This is because the guidelines include items related to the organization's teachings.

For example, the guidelines state that if a child falls asleep during a doctrinal lecture and a parent responds by hitting or whipping the child, this constitutes "physical abuse". They also classify refusal of a blood transfusion deemed necessary by a physician as "neglect". However, the Bible - highly valued by believers - contains teachings such as "do not withhold discipline from a child" [Proverbs 23:13] and "abstain from blood" [Acts 15:29].

From the standpoint of current social norms, it may seem reasonable to interpret corporal punishment and refusal of medical treatment as child abuse. In particular, refusal of blood transfusions is a difficult issue

because it can be life-threatening and lies at the boundary of religious freedom. However, if cases involving individuals aged 15 or older who possess decision-making capacity and voluntarily refuse transfusions are mechanically deemed "child abuse", does this not amount to denying the child's personhood? Would it not run counter to the growing emphasis on respecting children's right to self-determination? These issues require discussion from multiple perspectives.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, another persecuted religious minority in Japan. Here, a female believer at a street display for Jehovah's Witnesses in Naha City, Okinawa, Japan January 13, 2025

Although Japanese media have largely not reported on it, attention should be paid to the fact that not only Japanese education experts but also the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has issued warnings regarding these guidelines. The guidelines include provisions that classify religious instruction using phrases such as "you will go to hell if you do/do not do this" as "psychological abuse", potentially rejecting religious education itself and fostering prejudice and discrimination against religion.

There is no evidence that religious households have higher rates of child abuse than non-religious ones, yet these guidelines risk establishing a new category of "religious abuse". This cannot be accepted. Rather, it should be recognized as problematic that religious education for children has been neglected and that materialistic ways of thinking are spreading in society - factors that may be contributing to the rapid increase in child abuse.

However, even if an act is religious in nature, causing harm to another person's body constitutes a violation of the freedom of religion, as established by Supreme Court precedent. At the same time, the guidelines raise a fundamental question: to what extent can public authorities intervene when guardians, who hold the right to educate their children, provide religious instruction privately as part of passing on their faith? The failure to engage in this discussion is what constitutes a flaw in the guidelines.

Following the July 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the media focused on so-called "second-generation religious adherents" who claim to have been abused by parents with religious beliefs. Amid this surge of attention, the guidelines were hastily created. The religious organization's claim that the guidelines were drafted without seeking input from independent experts or the general public, and thus lack transparency, accurately points to a failing on the part of the government.

Discussion from Multiple Perspectives Is Needed

In drafting such guidelines, it is essential to hear from religious organizations and to engage in discussion from multiple perspectives, including the religious freedom of both parents and children, improvements in parenting difficulties, and the protection of children from abusive conduct. Only then should it be determined whether such guidelines are necessary.

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Cemetery Last Refuge For Displaced Worshippers

April 20, 2026 • Knut Holdhus

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As final appeal against "unconstitutional" dissolution order has been filed to Supreme Court, loss of worship spaces deepens crisis for Family Federation believers as they gather at their last refuge – a cemetery

Tokyo, 17th April 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper Sekai Nippo. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. Original article.

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[Part 9 (final) of a Series] In Search of a Spiritual Anchor – One Month After the Dissolution of the Family Federation

The Future of Believers Entrusted to a Special Appeal

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of Sekai Nippo

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The *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the Unification Church), which has entered liquidation proceedings, filed a special appeal with the Supreme Court

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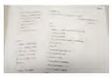
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which has entered liquidation proceedings, filed a special appeal with the Supreme Court of Japan on 9th March against the dissolution order issued by the *Tokyo High Court*. On 25th March, it submitted a statement of reasons for the appeal. The religious organization argues that including civil torts under the Civil Code as grounds for dissolution and handling the procedure as a non-public non-contentious case [See editor's note 1 below] are unconstitutional.

The religious organization also pointed out that since its 2009 "compliance declaration" [See editor's note 2 below], no specific acts or facts constituting alleged "unlawful acts" by its followers have been identified or established. Despite this, the court recognized as fact that "inappropriate donation solicitations constituting acts wrongful according to civil law continued even after the declaration" [See editor's note 2 below] and issued the dissolution order. The religious organization claims this represents "a serious departure from the fundamental structure of judicial proceedings" and violates the right to a fair trial.

***Setsu Kobayashi** (小林節), author, constitutional scholar and professor emeritus at Keio University, Japan. Photo (2015): OurPlanet-TV. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp*

In response to the High Court's decision, well-known figures who felt deep concern and a sense of crisis have also submitted opinion statements to the Supreme Court. Constitutional scholar Setsu Kobayashi *(小林節)*, Professor Emeritus at Keio University, emphasized that the case involves freedom of religion – considered a "preferred fundamental right". He argued that restrictions should be allowed only when there is a "clear and present danger", and that "less restrictive means" must be chosen. He criticized dismissing the impact of the religious organization's dissolution on believers as merely "indirect and de facto", and called the justification for a closed trial "far-fetched".

***Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto** (福本修也), here at Tokyo press conference 25th March 2025. Screenshot from video by FFWPU.*

Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto (福本修也), representing the Family Federation, stated on his law firm's website that "the High Court's logic – asserting, based on assumptions and speculation, that measures under the *Act on Prevention of Improper Donation Solicitation* are ineffective and that a dissolution order is indispensable – is completely flawed." He called on the Supreme Court to "avoid being swayed by public sentiment, calmly confront sound arguments head-on, and, after careful deliberation, render a wise judgment."

Placing their last hopes in the special appeal, believers are enduring difficult times during which they are unable to enter religious facilities now under the control of a court-appointed liquidator. Meanwhile, on 11th April, more than 500 believers visited the Minegashiro Cemetery (Central Japan Cemetery) in Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture – where the graves of fellow believers are located – to pay their respects. This was a "joint graveside visit" event organized by the *Central Japan Bereaved Families Association*.

According to the association, an annual joint memorial service called the "Central Japan Seiwa Festival" had previously been held at this time of year. As an alternative event, and in accordance with policies set by the liquidator, it was organized by the bereaved families' association rather than the religious organization.

Initially, attendance was expected to be at most around 200 people, but in reality, more than 500 participated – far exceeding expectations. Jiro Nakabayashi (中林次郎), head of the association, said,

> "Above all, we wanted people to feel glad they came. We made efforts to provide even better hospitality than at the Seiwa Festival, including boxed meals, pork soup, and ice cream."

Possibly influenced by the *Tokyo High Court*'s 4th March decision to uphold the dissolution order, he added,

> "I feel that many people came not only to visit graves but also looking forward to reconnecting with others they haven't seen in a long time."

The "Central Japan (Chu-Nihon) Cemetery" spreads across a mountain area in Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀); image partially edited.

One participant, a woman in her 30s living in the Chubu region, said she joined the event partly due to concerns about the future of the cemetery. She felt relieved that she was able to visit the graves without issue this time, saying,

> "Perhaps we've gotten past the concern that the cemetery itself might become subject to liquidation."

However, she also expressed ongoing anxiety, noting,

> "Given the strong voice of opponents of the Family Federation in the media, if something happens again, I think worries about the graves will resurface."

The psychological suffering of believers who have lost places for worship and community is immeasurable. The prospect of also losing the cemetery would be an unbearable burden. At present, the cemetery is the only place connected to the organization where believers – who cannot even enter church sanctuaries – can gather.

Whether believers will be able to regain their "spiritual anchor" (信仰の寄る辺), and whether Japanese society can reconsider what "religious freedom" truly means, now stand at a critical turning point.

(End of series)

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***Featured image** above: The Supreme Court in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)*

[***Editor's note 1***: A **non-contentious case** refers to a legal matter where there is no dispute between parties. These cases typically involve administrative, procedural, or uncontested legal actions, such as **probate (handling a deceased person's estate), uncontested divorces, adoption, or registering a trademark**. Since there are no opposing parties or legal conflicts, these cases usually proceed smoothly through the legal system without litigation.]

[***Editor's note 2:*** The **2009 compliance declaration** of the Unification Church of Japan (now the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification*) was a formal commitment by the organization to reform its practices in response to longstanding public criticism and legal challenges.

The Unification Church in Japan had faced numerous allegations related to recruitment tactics and donation solicitation, termed "spiritual sales" (霊感商法) by a hostile network of activist lawyers who had declared the religious organization an enemy. These issues led to multiple lawsuits orchestrated by the activist lawyers and significant media backlash. This prompted the organization to take measures to restore its reputation and demonstrate compliance with legal and ethical standards.

The religious organization pledged to stop possibly unethical donation practices, including what the hostile network of lawyers claimed amounted to "pressuring members into making large financial contributions under spiritual pretexts."

This was in response to accusations from the same activist lawyers that followers "were being manipulated into giving away substantial amounts of money or property."

The Unification Church stated it would enhance internal oversight to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards. Measures included better training for leaders and stricter guidelines for evangelization and solicitation of donations.

After this compliance declaration, there was a significant decrease in the number of lawsuits against the Unification Church – since 2015 called the Family Federation. The religious organization has used this as evidence that it has improved its practices and should not be subject to dissolution.]

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