

Unification Church in Japan: After the Dissolution, the Purge

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the political and legal landscape following the dissolution of the Unification Church in Japan, highlighting a systematic campaign to undermine its religious practices and the stability of its community. It critically analyzes measures proposed and implemented by anti-cult networks, including efforts to de-indoctrinate children and suppress religious expression under the guise of child protection and anti-cult legislation. The investigation reveals how these actions contravene international human rights standards, particularly the rights to freedom of religion, conscience, and association, as articulated in the ICCPR. The article also explores the broader implications for religious freedom and minority rights in democratic societies, emphasizing the risks posed by politicized judicial interpretations and activist agendas driven by religious intolerance. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the need for international vigilance to safeguard fundamental freedoms against coercive policies justified by unfounded theories of mind control and social norm enforcement.

KEYWORDS: Unification Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification; Minors and Religious Liberty in Japan; Dissolution of the Unification Church in Japan; ICCPR and Freedom of Religion or Belief; Brainwashing.

Introduction

Following the dissolution order issued in March by the Tokyo High Court against the Federation of Families for World Peace and Unification (hereinafter referred to as “the Unification Church” or “the Church”), opponents of the Church issued several statements expressing satisfaction, but also frustration that the dissolution did not lead to a complete ban on the Unification Church in the country. Anti-Church activists, led by some lawyers and religious competitors, urged the government to go further to prevent the very practice of the religion in Japan. This pressure continued after the June 22 Supreme Court decision confirming the dissolution.

According to the opponents, the problem with the Unification Church does not lie so much in deviant practices that could be corrected—as occasionally happens

in traditional religions—but rather in the faith itself, which they deem heretical, and in proselytizing, which they view as a form of mind control. Under the influence of such a lobby, several measures have been proposed or already implemented, particularly regarding the continued religious practice of individual believers or groups of believers, as well as the “issue” of minors raised in their parents’ faith, which is considered “child abuse related to religious belief.” This form of witch hunt—or religious purge—in a modern democracy, disguised as a campaign against “cults,” poses a real threat to freedom of conscience and the freedom to practice the religion of one’s choice, as well as to the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, all of which are protected by the treaties Japan committed to uphold after the end of World War II.

Anti-Heresy Movement

The National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS)—founded by lawyers close to the Communist Party at a time when Church members were campaigning against the spread of atheistic communism in East Asia—joined forces in 1987 with a group of Protestant pastors who viewed the Unification Church as a rival sect to eliminate the Church from Japan. For the following three decades, these lawyers worked in coordination with pastors involved in the “deprogramming” or forced deconversion of believers through their abduction and confinement by families and coerced indoctrination by pastors to recant the religion. This longstanding practice was euphemistically referred to as a “family issue” or “protection” by the Japanese authorities, who covered it up until the Human Rights Committee, in 2014, urged them to put a definitive end to it.

NNLASS lawyers, who pledged the elimination of the Church, made a statement right after the release of the High Court decision on March 4. They welcomed the Court’s decision but stated that it was not sufficient. Based on a biased interpretation of the religion—which they view as a form of mental manipulation—and of donations made to the Church—which they see as mere commercial transactions, completely disregarding the faith of the believers who solicit these donations—they claim that even future fundraising by groups of believers would constitute “unfair solicitation of donations,” just as the Church previously did (National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales 2026).

And they call for a revision of the law on the prevention of abusive solicitation of donations:

The current Unfair Donation Solicitation Prevention Act still shows several shortcomings in preventing or remedying the specific type of victimization associated with the Unification Church. This involves victims having their value judgments altered through illegal proselytizing activities that infringe upon freedom of religious choice, leading them to make donations as instructed. Furthermore, because the Act primarily prohibits corporate donation solicitation, it cannot regulate similar solicitation activities conducted by the Unification Church or its members as voluntary groups after losing their religious corporation status, or by individuals (National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales 2026).

These allegations—that Unification Church members “alter people’s value judgments” through “illegal proselytizing activities that infringe upon freedom of religious choice”—are based on the discredited and unsubstantiated theory of mind control, which courts of law have rejected as nonscientific worldwide (Introigne 2022).

Based on this flawed theory, the>NNLASS recommended amending the law to prohibit the collection of donations by groups of followers or by individual believers who wish to continue practicing the Unification Church’s faith. However, this is a Christian-inspired denomination with a body of doctrine developed by its founder and a large community of followers, which therefore meets the criteria for a religious community under international law and, as such, deserves the protection afforded by that law.

The dissolution of the only Unification Church religious entity that brought together all of Japan’s churches, along with the cessation of all related activities, left hundreds of thousands of believers without places of worship or any means to practice their religion in community with others in Japan.

The European Commission for Democracy through Law—better known as the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe’s advisory body composed of top constitutional experts—issued Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities, which provide that “the legal prohibition and sanctioning of unregistered activities is incompatible with international standards.”

In particular, the Commission specifically addressed the dissolution of religious organizations:

The withdrawal of legal personality from a religious or belief organization should not in any way imply that the religious or belief community in question, or its individual

members, no longer enjoy the protection of their freedom of religion or belief or other human rights and fundamental freedoms... Doing so would impose a collective sanction on the community as a whole for actions that, in fairness, should be attributed to specific individuals (Venice Commission 2014, §34).

Even if the Church had committed wrongdoing, only the individuals involved could be punished, and the practice of religion should not be affected. Yet>NNLASS lawyers want to go further than dissolution and prevent the religious practice by individuals or groups of faithful, and forbid the raising of necessary donations to fund their activities, in violation of the right to “establish and maintain religious institutions” protected by international human rights instruments, in particular the 1981 Declaration of the National Assembly, Article 6(f), which states that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief includes the freedom “to solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions” (General Assembly of the United Nations 1981).

The lawyers’ stance amounts to advocating the banning of an entire religion from Japan, just as in totalitarian states such as Russia, where the religion of Jehovah’s Witnesses has been banned as extremist and believers are regularly prosecuted for holding group meetings and reading the Bible at home. On March 13, 2026, the United Nations Human Rights Committee condemned the Russian Federation for violating the right to freedom of religion as a result of these arrests and incarcerations. The ruling obliges Russia to provide full reparations to the Witnesses involved and to take measures to prevent similar violations in the future (“Vilitkevich et al. v. Russian Federation,” CCPR/C/145/D/3192/2018; see Introvigne 2026).

In contravention of these international human rights standards,>NNLASS proposed similar measures to prohibit the practice of the Unification Church faith in Japan. They also expressed their intention to spread similar repression to South Korea, according to statements made to the media. On January 8, 2025, the>NNLASS signed an agreement with the Korean Association of Christian Heresy Counseling Centers to cooperate in their fight against “cults” in Japan and Korea and help “pass laws that regulate cult organizations in South Korea” (*Kirishin* 2025).

The representative of the Japanese lawyers explained that they have a serious problem in Japan: pastors who have been “counseling” believers and lost believers are in their 70s and 80s, and young pastors are not very involved. He stated that

“People who offer counseling do not grow up much in Japan. I envy the Korean system, which has consultation offices all over the country. We want to work with the pastors” (*Kirishin* 2025). It appears that, since Japanese pastors have stopped practicing deprogramming and the “counseling” of reluctant members has declined, Japanese lawyers are seeking to collaborate with Korean pastors who are actively fighting against heresy and who are known to continue engaging in such activities.

Furthermore, to continue the purge that had been carried out for decades in Japan through the deprogramming of believers, the lawyers proposed measures aimed at “de-indoctrinating” their children within the public school system.

The>NNLASS issued an Opinion in December 2023, recommending that the authorities adopt measures to re-educate second-generation believers to turn them away from their parents’ faith (Opinion Paper on the “Prevention of Harm and Support for Second-Generation Members of Religious and Similar Groups,” December 14, 2023; a copy of this document is in my files).

This recommendation was implemented through a plan adopted at a Cabinet meeting on January 19, 2024 (the “Proposed Measures to Enhance and Strengthen Support for Victims of the ‘Former Unification Church,’” hereafter the “Plan”; a copy of this document is in my files).

Yoshihide Sakurai, another leading figure in the fight against heresy and “cults” in Japan, a professor of sociology at Hokkaido University, and a Nichiren Buddhist priest, recently gave an interview to the *Asahi Shimbun* on April 18, 2026. He stated that he had long recommended the dissolution of the Church and was pleased that it had been decided, but insisted that this measure was not sufficient. According to him, “the problems associated with the former Unification Church will not simply disappear. Many believers will continue practicing their faith even if the group loses its status as a religious corporation” (Shimazaki 2026).

In particular, he expressed concern that second-generation believers “continue to suffer, well into adolescence and adulthood, from the effects of what may be called ‘religious abuse’ during their formative years”—referring to their religious education—“to the point that their ability to make free decisions and even their grasp of ordinary social norms may be impaired.” He added that “even when such children do not inherit the faith, they often remain strongly affected by their parents’ cognitive biases and by the worldview of the group.”

According to these advocates of thought control, the problem with parents' religious beliefs lies in the worldview they instill in their children, which, they argue, prevents them from grasping the social norms and appropriate ways of thinking in Japanese society. This constitutes an unacceptable violation of the right to freedom of conscience and belief, as well as the right to live according to one's chosen worldview and to raise one's children accordingly.

It should be noted that it was precisely based on "social norms" that the civil courts ruled against the Church and that the High Court ordered the dissolution of its religious association (Duval 2025a, 2025b). However, social norms must under no circumstances be used to determine whether a religion should be tolerated. All beliefs deserve protection, and the State has a duty to remain neutral in religious matters, as emphasized by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No. 22, which gives directions to State parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):

Article 18 protects theistic, nontheistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms 'belief' and 'religion' are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community (United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993, 2).

In contravention of these international standards, antiheresy and anticult activists are making increasingly extreme statements, calling for measures to prevent the practice of the Unification Church faith and "worldview" in Japan. Relying on the fallacious argument that religious education exerts undue influence, they proposed—and the government adopted—measures aimed at systematically "deindoctrinating" children from the education provided by their parents.

In their Opinion submitted to the government,>NNLASS lawyers argued that children do not voluntarily adopt their parents' religious beliefs because of their young age. Yet it is precisely the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their own convictions that States Parties, including Japan, have sought to protect through Article 18(4) of the ICCPR:

The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

In violation of this protected right, NNLASS argues that, to enable children to regain their ability to choose “freely,” they must be provided with “critical” information that challenges their parents’ beliefs, so that they can regain their “critical thinking skills.”

In their Opinion submitted to the government in December 2023, these lawyers provided the following description of the “problem” to justify the reeducation of children:

Individuals raised by parents who practice a particular religion—especially when they are forced to adopt that religion or are educated according to its teachings—are generally referred to as “second-generation religious followers.”

“Second-generation followers” are viewed as victims who have not yet realized the extent of their indoctrination and who must be reeducated to turn away from their parents’ faith:

It has also become clear that individuals who grow up in such environments during the formative years of their personality often remain unable to break away from the religious doctrines instilled in them, even after reaching adulthood, resulting in long-term psychological instability and ongoing difficulties in daily life.

It is clear from this explanation that the goal is to prevent the children of Unification Church members from becoming believers and followers of that religion in the future.

The plan published by the government in January 2024—titled “Proposed Measures to Enhance and Strengthen Support for Victims of the ‘Former Unification Church’”—is entirely designed to reeducate the children of Unification Church members, who are considered victims even though they have not complained about anything. They are presumed to be under mind control and must be deindoctrinated so that they turn away from their parents’ religion.

The argument that second generation followers “suffer” and need help is a fabrication designed to justify the indoctrination of these children in Japanese public schools. The following developments show that, in reality, if there is any suffering, it is the result of the Japanese authorities’ policy of stigmatization and the destruction of families.

Government Plan for De-Indoctrination

The governmental measures adopted in January 2024 implement the following:

1. the indoctrination of children in elementary school through cartoons and online discussion forums regarding “abuses” related to religious beliefs;
2. “awareness-raising” sessions organized as part of human rights courses, including “consumer education” on religious donations—as if donations to a church were a matter of consumer law—particularly regarding the “criminal financial activities” of the Unification Church, to make children “aware” of the problems that may arise from their parents’ membership in that church;
3. the distribution of SOS mini-letters to be filled out by children and leaflets with telephone numbers for them to call for further questions and talks with counselors;
4. consultation services provided by counselors trained by hostile former members of the Unification Church;
5. referral to mental health institutions of children made anxious about their parents’ affiliation; and
6. requests for the suspension of parental authority and temporary custody in cases of suspected abuse, as provided in the “Guidelines for Handling Cases of Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs,” to remove the children from their parents’ influence.

In summary, the “re-education” provided during the Ministry of Justice’s human rights classes aims at making children realize that, due to religion, their parents have been abusing them since an early age. And by “drawing on the knowledge and expertise of former members,” as the government’s plan stipulates, the training of counselors can only lead to this “counseling” being used to indoctrinate children against their parents’ religious beliefs.

The Guidelines

The Guidelines, titled “Questions and Answers on Responding to Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs” (the “Guidelines”), were issued by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare on December 27, 2022 (English translation in

appendix to Introvigne 2023). These Guidelines, intended to serve as a reference for teachers and school counselors, include examples of how to respond to cases of “child abuse related to religious beliefs.” They were the subject of an official UN Communication sent to the Japanese government on April 30, 2024, and signed by four Special Rapporteurs to the Human Rights Council—responsible, respectively, for freedom of religion, freedom of education, freedom of expression, and freedom of association—who expressed their concerns regarding the Guidelines’ non-compliance with international law (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025).

As stated in the Communication, they “were drafted in consultation with the Japanese Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (JSCPR), whose Chairperson called for the recognition of a new type of child abuse by religious groups in October 2022, and had previously made public statements denigrating the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious or belief minorities.” They were “hastily prepared, in just 18 days (December 5–23, 2022), in closed-door sessions with those same anti-cult groups, and adopted without any independent expert review or public consultation” (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Japan 2024, I, 4).

These Guidelines include, among other things, that making a child attend religious services when they do not feel like it or participate in religious activities constitutes “psychological abuse,” and that imprinting continuous fear since childhood through verbal reprimands or references to “hell” constitutes child abuse. Clearly, the focus here is on the religious education that parents may provide to their children, as well as their religious, moral, and ethical values and the religious practice itself.

As stated by the four United Nations experts, the Guidelines “appear to set a lower threshold for the establishment of abuse in religious as opposed to non-religious contexts.” For instance, the Guidelines

assert that “forcing a child to participate in religious activities, etc., during hours that may interfere with the child’s schooling or daily life constitutes neglect,” without clarifying what is meant by “forcing,” nor what distinguishes “religious activities, etc.” in this case from activities such as extra tutorials, music or language lessons, or other secular extra-curricular activities in “daily life” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025).

The UN Special Rapporteurs concluded that

the Guidelines in their current form may undermine the rights of children to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 14.1); and of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions, as set out in article 18, paragraph 4 of the ICCPR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025).

They added that they

are also concerned that in the context of heightened suspicion of religious or belief minorities, the Guidelines in their current form may facilitate stigma, social pressure, or bullying of children belonging to religious or belief communities (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025).

They called on the Japanese government to review and reconsider certain key aspects of the Guidelines to ensure compliance with Japan's international human rights obligations.

However, Japan's authorities never reconsidered the Guidelines. On the contrary, the Guidelines have been widely disseminated to teachers, counselors, and social workers, and training sessions and briefings have been organized to ensure proper awareness so that they can track down cases of "child abuse due to religious beliefs."

Tracing Children from Religious Minorities

An important phase of the governmental plan concerns the role assigned to teachers, social workers, and counselors in identifying children from Unification Church families who are deemed to need specific "counseling." These school staff are instructed to act "in the absence of explicit statements from the child," so their primary mission is to identify those children.

In its opinion submitted to the government, which led to the adoption of the plan, the NNLASS specifies what instructions should be given in this regard:

As a prerequisite for such efforts, it is essential that schools first identify children who are facing problems related to religion or similar belief systems. As an initial indication, a child may speak to school staff about concerns related to their parents' religious beliefs while at school. It is also possible that teachers may come to recognize the influence of religious beliefs on a child when, for instance, the parent or the child requests certain accommodations in academic or school life based on faith, or when the child engages in behavior at school that differs from that of other students. Given that the conditions of a child's home life are often difficult for third parties

to observe, schools must make every effort not to overlook such signs and to identify children facing second-generation religious issues accurately.

Therefore, school staff are instructed to take action even in the absence of any request from the child or any indication of problems in the child's family life. They are instructed to look for signs of religious upbringing and then infer the existence of problems from those signs. Their first step is to spy on the children and identify those likely to come from a Unification Church family. For this purpose, a "Guide for Psychological Counseling on cult issues" has been provided to them.

"Guide for Psychological Counseling on Cult Issues"

Encouraged by officials of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)—the ministry that oversees religious issues and requested the dissolution of the Unification Church—the Japanese Society of Clinical Psychologists produced a booklet especially designed for school counselors and clinical psychologists. The Guide is entirely based on anti-cult literature and references to the mind control theory.

They provide the following instructions:

3. Listen Carefully and Elicit Specific Details with Sensitivity. It is necessary to gain a detailed understanding of the child's living conditions and family environment. In doing so, it is important to encourage the child, as much as possible, to describe specific situations. For example, asking what kind of place they are taken to on Sundays or what their parents say to them can help clarify whether religious factors are at play. Then, when children are identified, counseling should be organized with the school administration (Japanese Society of Clinical Psychologists 2025, 4).

This alone constitutes a violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief, which encompasses the right not to be compelled to reveal one's religious affiliation, as clearly stated by the Human Rights Committee: "In accordance with articles 18.2 and 17, no one can be compelled to reveal his thoughts or adherence to a religion or belief" (United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993).

ICCPR Article 17 provides that "no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, family, or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honor and reputation." Article 18.2 states that "no one shall be subject to coercion that would impair their freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of his choice."

The instructions given to school counselors and workers to collect information about children's religious affiliation and then impose "counseling" on them regarding this matter constitute a violation of both children's right to privacy and their freedom of religion or belief.

In the absence of any apparent or reported issues, school staff are encouraged to urge children to provide information about their family's religious practices and to voice criticisms of their parents:

At the same time, children may feel hesitant to speak about their parents. They may be reluctant to say anything negative or may avoid discussing the topic altogether. Therefore, when asking about situations in which the child has experienced distress or hardship, it is important to proceed gently, addressing each situation one by one without pressure and allowing the child to speak at their own pace (Japanese Society of Clinical Psychologists, 2025, 6).

Then, instructions are given that

When it is suspected that a student is experiencing difficulties related to a religious background, the matter should be reported and discussed with school administrators (Japanese Society of Clinical Psychologists 2025, 6).

To this end, children must be urged to consent to the disclosure of their religious affiliation to the entire administration:

A key consideration is to obtain the student's consent before sharing information. If the student expresses reluctance, counselors should carefully explain that information sharing is intended to ensure the student's safety and well-being and seek understanding through ongoing dialogue until concerns are alleviated. Once consent is obtained, the school as a whole needs to respond in a coordinated and systematic manner. Under the guidance of school administrators, relevant staff—including counselors, homeroom teachers, grade leaders, school nurses, and school social workers—should carefully organize and review factual information (Japanese Society of Clinical Psychologists 2025, 7).

The Guide then addresses "Inappropriate Responses That Counselors Commonly Fall Into." The first inappropriate response, according to the Guide, is: "You should talk it over carefully with your parents or family." The explanation is revealing:

Children are often fully aware that meaningful discussion with their family is difficult. This is not simply because their parents are stubborn or verbally abusive, but because the parents' views are grounded in religious conviction, making them unlikely to change. Moreover, children repeatedly experience in daily life that opinions differing from their parents' wishes are not accepted. For this reason, advising them simply to "discuss it with your family" may fail to grasp the reality of their situation (Japanese Society of Clinical Psychologists 2025, 9).

The instruction given to the children is clear: do not communicate with your parents about what is being said at school regarding their religious affiliation. In testimony given at the United Nations in Geneva in June 2025, a second-generation mother, Yoshiko Nishi (recording in my files), reported that her son has not spoken to her since he watched certain reports on television and was briefed at school. He came to believe that his parents belonged to a criminal organization. This mother explained that children are told not to speak about the briefings they receive, making it impossible for parents to know what is happening, as their questions remain unanswered.

She stated:

One of the most painful moments of my life was with my fourteen-year-old son. One day, when he went to the dentist's office, he saw television reports branding our church as "criminal." He came home shaken. He asked me, "Did we do something wrong?" I said no and tried to explain. But after constant exposure to hatred at school and in the media, he told me, "If you don't abandon this church, I will cut all contact with you. You say you love us, but how can you put your children in such danger?" His fear was real. Fear of rejection. Fear of losing friends. Fear of being denied opportunities for education or work. My sweet son now lives with paranoia and shame, afraid of his own family. This campaign is not protecting society. It is destroying tens of thousands of lives and families by branding peaceful citizens as criminals.

Once the children have been pitted against their parents, the school teams consider removal measures, including temporary placement.

The students are being offered some housing, far from their parents' environment. The Plan provides that they will be offered "a temporary living space away from their parents or other believers, facilitating their path to rebuilding their lives."

The faith of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification is rooted in family values, and its members often raise large families in an atmosphere of love and respect for those values. The Japanese government's Plan aims to break up these faith-based families and is leading to their collapse. The policy implemented in Japanese public schools results in the stigmatization of thousands of Unification Church's second-generation believers and contravenes all international human rights standards in this regard.

Conclusion

This situation is extremely concerning for freedom of conscience and belief in Japan.

We respectfully urge the United Nations human rights bodies to remind the Japanese authorities of their obligations to protect freedom of religion or belief, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression for all people in the country.

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