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Unification Church: Why are UN Special Rapporteurs not allowed to visit Japan?

Several different Rapporteurs have been prevented from going to Japan and examine the religious liberty and human rights situation there.

by Willy Fautré,

[Bitter Winter](#) (02.04.2025) - Japan remains deaf to repeated visit requests of several UN Special Rapporteurs in the shadow of the case of the Unification Church, which now officially calls itself the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. The dissolution of the church was ordered on March 25 in first degree by the Tokyo District Court after a government request spurred by the 2022 assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe.

On 14 January 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Nicolas Levrat, sent a reminder to Tokyo, which remained unanswered. His first request was dated 5 February 2024.

On 20 December 2024, Ashwini K.P., UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, had also sent a reminder that had remained unanswered.

On 28 March 2024, Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, sent an invitation request, which one year later remains unanswered.

In 2011, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) carried out a first field mission in Japan and a second one in 2012 to collect testimonies of members of the Unification Church who had been kidnapped and privately imprisoned for weeks, months, and even years in total impunity by members of their families opposed to their conversion to the said church. In the aftermath of this investigation, HRWF published a damning report of 116 pages titled "Japan Abduction and Deprivation of Freedom for the Purpose of Religious De-conversion" which can be obtained through [Amazon](#). For decades, thousands of testimonies of forced recanting of religion were collected but the judiciary dismissed all the complaints under the pretext that it was a "family matter." Justice was systematically denied to the numerous members of the Unification Church who were victims of abduction and forced confinement by private persons, domestic violence and psychological torture, brainwashing and forceful de-conversion. Moreover, the perpetrators were never prosecuted.

The most serious case was the one of [Toru Goto](#) abducted and kept in confinement for 12 years and 5 months by several members of his family with some accomplices. In January 2011, he filed a civil lawsuit against his jailers: close relatives, a Christian pastor, and an “anti-cult” activist involved in his confinement. In September 2015, the Supreme Court confirmed the High Court ruling, ordering the defendants to pay 22 million yen in damages. This unique ruling had a deterrent effect on many opponents to the Unification Church and afterwards the number of abduction and confinement for forced de-conversion dropped dramatically. The number of victims could have been drastically limited from the beginning if Japan’s judiciary had taken its responsibility and had served justice.

Jehovah’s Witnesses were also affected by the phenomenon of family abduction and confinement for forced de-conversion, but to a lesser extent, about 200 cases.

The full HRWF report was presented at the 111th Session of the UN Human Rights Council.

In the aftermath of this report, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Mutuma Ruteere, sent an invitation request in 2013 which was never answered.

On 25 March 2025, the Tokyo District Court ordered the dissolution of the Family Federation in Japan.

After the killing of Shinzo Abe media and opponents highlighted some ideological and political proximity between the South Korea-based anti-communist church and Japan’s governing Liberal Democratic Party.

The church had been granted legal status as a religious organization in Japan in 1968, when it was at the forefront of an anti-communist popular movement supported by Abe’s grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi.

The prosecution of the Unification Church was obviously politically motivated as an opportunity to damage the party of Shinzo Abe. At the same time, Communist actors and counter-cultist Protestant movements united their efforts to get rid of [a church that was anti-Communist](#) right from its inception and was disturbing their own agendas. Late Reverend Sun Myung Moon founded the church in Seoul in 1954, a year after the end of the Korean War. He spent his life preaching conservative and family-oriented values. He died in 2012.

Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, resented the church and made it responsible for his family’s financial troubles allegedly due to his mother’s disproportionate donations to the church. He also blamed Shinzo Abe whom he perceived as supporting the church.

The charges against the Unification Church included manipulative fundraising and recruitment tactics that allegedly sowed fear among followers and harmed their families.

The church acknowledged excessive donations, but said the problem had lessened since the group stepped up compliance in 2009 and by 2022 had almost disappeared.

The Unification Church is the third religious group to face a dissolution order under Japan’s civil code but the first dissolved on the basis of civil torts only. Noteworthy is that the church as such and its leaders and executives have never before been found guilty in a single criminal case.

Quite a number of scholars in religious studies, international human rights lawyers, and organizations defending freedom of religion or belief have criticized the ruling of the Tokyo District Court, considering the dissolution disproportionate, based on ill-founded arguments, including on falsified written statements, and manipulated statistics, as the French lawyer Patricia Duval wrote in details in an article entitled "[Japan and the Unification Church: False Figures Supported the Dissolution](#)" published by "Bitter Winter."

They think that Japan's refusal to ignore repeated visit requests of UN Special Rapporteurs is meant to avoid criticism by the United Nations about the judicial management of the Unification Church and other cases.

The revocation of the church's legal status means it will lose its tax-exempt privilege, and its assets will be given to a liquidator. If the Unification Church loses on appeal later this year, the decision will become immediately enforceable with dramatic consequences:

- all the assets, including the donations made by the members for religious, humanitarian and other projects, will be transferred to a liquidator;
- all the buildings of the Unification Church will also be transferred to a liquidator;
- the members of the church will lose their places of worship.

This may be compared to the dissolution of Jehovah's Witnesses by the Russian Federation in 2017, when it was declared an extremist organization.

It is easy to understand that Japan does not want to open its doors to several UN Special Rapporteurs. This is the new battlefield that defenders of freedom of religion must now prioritize because in Asia there is no Venice Commission, a mechanism of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe to check the conformity of national draft laws with international standards, and there is no continental court like the European Court of Human Rights.

Religion and the public Welfare principle 2. The assault on the Unification Church

The "public welfare" principle implies that if a religion displeases the majority, it can be eradicated. It is what is happening to the Unification Church.

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

By Patricia Duval

[Bitter Winter](#) (17.03.2025) - In the first article of this series, I argued that the reference to "public welfare" in Japanese law as a ground to limit religious liberty and even dissolve religious corporations is inconsistent with Japan's international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Invoking "public welfare" also implies that if a religion displeases the majority of citizens, then it can be eradicated.

This is precisely the case with the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, formerly known as the Unification Church (hereafter designated for ease of understanding as the "Unification Church" or the "Church" or the "UC").

Following the shooting of Prime Minister Abe in July 2022 by a man whose apparent motivation was his resentment due to Abe's sympathy for the Church, scapegoating and hate speech flourished in the media. The criminal investigation was, strangely enough, never brought to a conclusion but the Church was deemed responsible although a virulent opponent of the UC had committed the murder.

Riding the wave of constant media campaigns since then, which have presented the Church as a criminal organization, the Government filed for dissolution of the UC.

In December 2023, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), which oversees religious matters, requested dissolution of the Unification Church, claiming that it had caused serious harm to public welfare because it "disrupted the peaceful life of many people" by not obeying "social norms."

It relied on 32 adverse civil court decisions in cases filed by apostates after their "deprogramming"—a nationwide practice of families endorsed by the Government of abduction and confinement of Church members until they recant their faith. In each of these cases, the civil courts found torts based on the allegation that the Church violated "social norms."

"Social norms" is a vague and arbitrary concept that has no place in matters of religious beliefs and practices and violates, alike "public welfare," the duty of neutrality of Japan in religious matters and its commitment to Article 18 of the Covenant.

The Ministry's dissolution request is presently pending at the Tokyo District Court, but the Japanese Supreme Court [rendered a decision on March 3, 2025](#), in a case linked, but ancillary, to the dissolution request.

At Japan's Supreme Court, acceptable grounds for final appeal in civil and administrative cases are violation of the Constitution and serious breach of procedural laws and regulations by lower courts.

In the present case, the Supreme Court had to address two appeals from the Church's lawyer:

- one for breach of Article 81 of the Religious Corporations Act (because the government's claim of dissolution alleges that findings of tort constitute a violation of laws and regulations), and
- one for violation of the Constitution, in particular of freedom of religion or belief and Article 18 of the Covenant due to the use of public welfare and social norms as a basis for dissolution.

On the first appeal, the Court ruled that findings of tort [can be considered as a violation of laws and regulations](#), which will not be discussed here.

To the second appeal, the Court responded by one simple sentence: "The grounds for the present appeal allege unconstitutionality; however, in substance, they merely assert a violation of statutory law and do not fall under the grounds for a special appeal."

In answering in this way, the Court did not even bother to answer the argument of unconstitutionality or that of violation of international human rights law.

Apart from the bad omen that it gives about the pending District Court decision on dissolution, this constitutes further evidence of Japan's willful ignorance of the treaties they are committed to and of its disregard for the international community.

The UN Human Rights Committee was created by the Covenant, which entered into force in 1975, in order to monitor its implementation by State parties. Japan ratified the Covenant and therefore accepted the Committee's authority for this monitoring in 1979.

Since 1980, the government of Japan has justified to the Committee the public welfare restriction to human rights in its Constitution by merely stating that "the concept of the public welfare, however, is given a strict interpretation and is not abused for unreasonable restriction of human rights" (see Japan's report prior to the Committee's review, 14 November 1980, page 2, CCPR/C/10/, Add.1).

And the Human Rights Committee has ever since scolded Japan in its Concluding Observations, after each review of Japan's implementation of the Covenant, and made the following pressing demand: "The Committee reiterates its concern that the concept of 'public welfare' is vague and open-ended and may permit restrictions exceeding those permissible under the Covenant (arts. 2, 18 and 19)." "The Committee recalls its previous concluding observations (see CCPR/C/JPN/CO/5, para. 10) and urges the State party to refrain from imposing any restriction on the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or freedom of expression unless they fulfil the strict conditions set out in paragraph 3 of articles 18 and 19" (Concluding Observations of 20 August 2014, CCPR/C/JPN/CO/6, §22; see also the former and last reviews of Japan by the Committee: 8 December 2008, CCPR/C/JPN/CO/5, §10, and 30 November 2022, CCPR/C/JPN/CO/7, §37).

It can be concluded that the Japanese authorities have known for forty-five years that they had to review their internal instruments in order to conform with the Covenant but have consistently refused to do so and refused to meet their commitments to the international community.

The Special Rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council—the intergovernmental human rights body of the UN—are independent human rights experts with mandates to report and give advice on human rights, from a thematic or country-specific perspective.

In this capacity, they undertake [country visits](#) and act on individual cases of reported violations and concerns of a broader nature by sending [communications](#) to the UN member States.

Following a report from the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief sent [a joint communication](#) to Japan on 30th April 2024, together with the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of assembly and association.

The four Special Rapporteurs expressed their concerns about the "[Guidelines on child abuse related to religious faith](#)," adopted by Japan in December 2022, which entailed serious violations of Article 18 of the Covenant.

Simultaneously, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief sent an official request to Japan on 28 March 2024 to pay a visit there to gather more information on the existing environment for religious minorities in the country.

In order to avoid being at odds with the international community's human rights policy, Japan did issue a "standing invitation" on 11th March 2011 (in fact, as of 11 March 2025, 128 Member States out of 193 have extended such a standing invitation).

A standing invitation is an open invitation extended by a Government to all the Human Rights Council Special Rapporteurs. By extending a standing invitation, states announce that they will always accept requests to visit from all Special Rapporteurs.

However, Japan never replied to the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief's request for a visit sent a year ago, and thus the visit cannot be organized, which de facto prevents the visit from happening.

Not surprisingly, another Special Rapporteur is in an even worse situation: the Special Rapporteur on minority issues.

Due to reports on Japan's ill treatment of minorities, successive Special Rapporteurs on Minority Issues have, over the years, not been able to pay a single visit to Japan since the creation of their mandate in 2005.

In spite of regular reminders of visit requests that they have sent, such as in October 2016, February 2024 and January 2025, Japan has never bothered to reply to their requests.

In reality, the Japanese authorities sit back on their public welfare dictatorship and ignore all the UN Human Rights Committee's recommendations to the contrary, ignore the requests for visits from the various Human Rights Council Special Rapporteurs, but continue playing the good Samaritan at United Nations international meetings.

They even applied to be a member of the International Religion Freedom or Belief Alliance ("IRFBA") founded in 2020 at the instigation of the U.S. Department of State under Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world.

Deceivingly, Japan works on maintaining its image of being a human rights democracy, not on actually becoming one.

Religion and the "public welfare" principle 1. Betraying Japan's international obligations

By keeping in its Constitution and laws the principle that religions may have their activities restricted and even be suppressed in the name of "public welfare," Japan violates its international obligations.

by Patricia Duval

[Bitter Winter](#) (14.03.2025) - In the wake of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights signed in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations has adopted a series of human

rights treaties to elaborate further on the various human rights protected by the international community.

This is the case in particular with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ("ICCPR" or "Covenant"), which entered into force in 1976, and which Japan signed in 1978.

However, the Japanese authorities have ever since ignored this commitment and silently betrayed the international community, as most Japanese people in Japan itself are unaware of it.

Article 18.1 of the Covenant protects "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion," which right includes "freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."

Therefore the right protected under the Covenant includes the right to manifest one's religion or beliefs in community with others, through the establishment and maintenance of religious institutions.

Article 18.3 lays out the few permissible cases when States can enact legislative restrictions to this right: "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

The cases of permitted limitations are to be strictly construed and the protection of "public welfare" is not part of them.

However, like Russia, which has invented a new concept of "spiritual security" to justify repressing religious minorities, Japan has created, in blatant contravention of the Covenant provision, another exception to this freedom: protection of "public welfare" and respect for "social norms."

When Japan adopted its new Constitution after World War II in 1946, it expressed its desire to regain prestige amongst the international community, after its alliance with the Nazi regime and the appalling horrors of Hiroshima: "We, the Japanese people, desire peace for all time and are deeply conscious of the high ideals controlling human relationships, and we have determined to preserve our security and existence, trusting in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world. We desire to occupy an honored place in an international society striving for the preservation of peace, and the banishment of tyranny and slavery, oppression and intolerance for all time from the earth. We recognize that all peoples of the world have the right to live in peace, free from fear and want."

Japan thereby committed to protect fundamental rights of its citizens, in particular the right to freedom of religion under Article 20 of the Constitution.

However, the Japanese Constitution provides a major exemption from the obligation to respect this right, which is inconsistent with Japan's commitments under international human rights law.

Article 12 of the Constitution reads: "The freedoms and rights guaranteed to the people by this Constitution shall be maintained by the constant endeavor of the people, who shall

refrain from any abuse of these freedoms and rights and shall always be responsible for utilizing them for the public welfare.”

This provision implies that these freedoms, in particular freedom of religion or belief, can be restricted in cases of infringement of “public welfare.”

As a matter of fact, when in 1951 Japan enacted the Religious Corporations Act, which regulates the status and functioning of religious corporations, it included a limitation to this freedom based on public welfare.

Article 81 of the Act provides that courts can order the dissolution of religious corporations when “in violation of laws and regulations, the religious corporation commits an act which is clearly found to harm public welfare substantially.”

Thereby, the right to the status of religious corporation can be restricted for the protection of “public welfare,” a vague and arbitrary term that has no place in matters of religion or belief, in particular when deciding on the legal “death” of a religious entity.

Considering these restrictions, both in the 1946 Constitution and the 1951 Act, the Japanese authorities, when they signed the Covenant in 1978 and committed to Article 18.3 which provides that no limitation can be enacted other than those restrictively listed, should have modified their national instruments accordingly.

This is particularly true in consideration of Article 98 of the Constitution which provides: “The treaties concluded by Japan and established laws of nations shall be faithfully observed.”

Therefore, when Japan signed and ratified the Covenant, it should have subsequently amended Article 12 of its Constitution to erase the public welfare exception, and Article 81 of the Religious Corporate Act to erase infringement of public welfare as a basis for dissolution.

Doing otherwise reveals that Article 98 of the Constitution is merely a smokescreen for outsiders, and that Japan never had the intention to uphold its commitments in total disregard of its treaty co-signatories.

Keeping “public welfare” in the Constitution and in the Religious Corporations Act as a basis for dissolution of religious corporations is tantamount to saying that if a religion displeases a majority of people, then it can be eradicated.

Protection of public welfare is very different from protection of public order, which is a permitted limitation under the Covenant, and which was a valid basis for example to severely punish the authors of the criminal sarin gas attack by Aum Shinrikyo in the Tokyo subway in 1995.

Public welfare intends to protect the wellbeing of the public at large, not their security. When applied to religious matters, it intends to protect the wellbeing of the public against minority beliefs or practices in the absence of any public order or security issue.

This is incompatible with Article 18 of the Covenant. The UN Human Rights Committee—the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Covenant by its States parties—has elaborated on Article 18 in Comment 22: “2. Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic 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.”

Hence, the very essence of Article 18 implies a duty of neutrality on the part of member states in religious matters and their duty of protection of religious minorities against “predominant” hostility.

Protection of “public welfare” represents the antithesis of it. It actually turns out to be a tool particularly convenient for the Japanese authorities to take repressive measures against religious minorities, when hate speech has spread in the media for several years with the government’s blessing and has incited the public at large to hate the religious groups in question.
