

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: s Korea's Arbitrary Detention of Mother Han and Pastor Son

Knut Holdhus
October 7, 2025



From a prayer vigil in front of Seoul Detention Center October 4, 2025



Free Mother Han and Pastor Son: A call to defend democracy in South Korea as weaponization of law against faith is exposed

See also [Firsthand Account of Ordeal of Mother Han \(82\)](#)

See also [Law as Weapon: Old Age and Frail Health Ignored](#)

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



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, here June 166, 2025

On 7th October, noted sociologist of religion Dr. Massimo Introvigne published a searing indictment in [Bitter Winter](#) of what he terms South Korea's "crisis of democracy". His article, "[Free Mother Han! Free Pastor Son! Confronting South Korea's Crisis of Democracy](#)", is both a call to conscience and a meticulous documentation of human rights violations taking place in a nation once celebrated as a model of democratic governance in Asia.

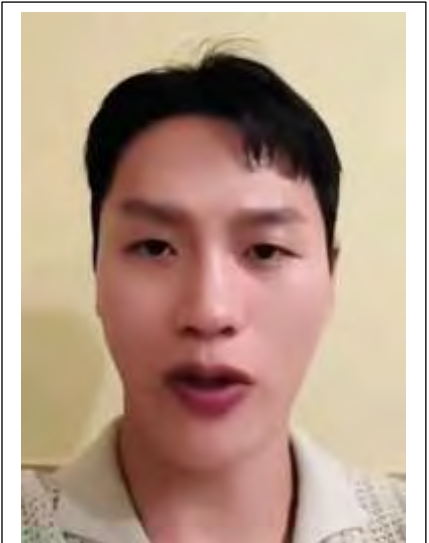
Introvigne focuses on the arbitrary detention of two religious figures - Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#), the spiritual leader of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU), and Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of Busan's Segyero Church (세계로교회 - literally: To the World Church) - whose cases, he argues, expose a dangerous erosion of due process, religious liberty, and political freedom in South Korea.

A Democracy in Peril

Introvigne opens with a deeply human moment: the message of Chance Son, a son worried about his father's deteriorating health in prison,

"My family went for a 10-minute visitation earlier today, my dad has caught the flu, and his voice is almost gone. He won't be able to get a prescription and medicine until about 10 days later. Please pray that his health doesn't get worse."

The image is poignant and strategic - it reminds readers that the issue at stake is not abstract politics but the suffering of real individuals. Pastor Son, Introvigne explains, has been jailed not for any proven crime, but for exercising his constitutional right to encourage civic participation. His sermons, which reportedly urged congregants to support candidates sympathetic to his values, have been treated as "illegal electioneering". This criminalization of



Chance Son in September 2025

religious speech, Introvigne suggests, signals a chilling shift from democratic pluralism to ideological persecution.



The heart of Introvigne's article, however, centers on Mother [Hak Ja Han](#), the revered co-founder and spiritual leader of the [Family Federation](#). Her detention, he asserts, is emblematic of a broader campaign to dismantle her [movement](#) through a blend of legal manipulation and psychological pressure. He documents in stark detail her grueling interrogations - nearly 25 hours over two weeks - despite her advanced age and frail health. These tactics, he writes, are not a "search for truth" but "psychological attrition", designed to break the will of a religious leader through exhaustion and humiliation.

Legal Pretext, Political Motive

Introvigne's critique of the Korean authorities is scathing yet precise. He dismantles the prosecution's claims that [Mother Han](#) misused [Federation](#) resources for political purposes, noting that no credible evidence has been presented linking her personally to any wrongdoing. Even the core allegation - that the [Family Federation](#)

orchestrated mass political enrollment into the People Power Party (PPP) - has collapsed, with inflated figures quietly revised downward from 110,000 to 3,500, according to media reports. For Introvigne, this unraveling case illustrates not the impartial operation of justice but a politically motivated witch hunt targeting a [faith community](#) unpopular with certain segments of Korean society and government.



He contextualizes this within international legal frameworks, invoking the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) and the [UN Standard Minimum Rules](#) - commonly known as the Tokyo Rules and [Nelson Mandela Rules](#). South Korea, as a signatory to these instruments, is bound to ensure that pre-trial detention is exceptional, not punitive; that interrogation is humane; and that detainees receive adequate medical care. The treatment of [Mother Han](#) and Pastor Son, Introvigne argues, violates all these standards. In denying medical access to Pastor Son and subjecting [Mother Han](#) to excessive questioning, South Korea is betraying its democratic credentials and breaching its international human rights obligations.

A Wider Crackdown on Conscience

Importantly, Introvigne situates these arrests within a larger pattern of democratic backsliding. He notes that protesters against the government's pro-China policies and critics of President Lee's administration have faced intimidation and surveillance. The same state apparatus that once safeguarded pluralism now appears to be

turning against dissenters of all kinds - religious, civic, and political. The legal system, he warns, is being "weaponized against dissent". The implication is grave: when religion, speech, and assembly are criminalized, democracy ceases to be a living reality and becomes merely a façade.

Transnational Repression



Introvigne also exposes the international dimension of this campaign. He points to the coordinated pressure between Japan and South Korea to weaken or destroy the [Family Federation](#). Japan's March 2025 [court ruling](#) ordering the dissolution of the [Federation](#) - currently [under appeal](#) - was widely condemned by human rights experts and the United Nations for violating freedom of religion and association. Now, South Korea appears to be following suit through judicial harassment and arbitrary detention. In this sense, the persecution of [Mother Han](#) is not an isolated domestic issue but part of a regional pattern of religious repression, with chilling

implications for all faith-based organizations in East Asia.

A Call to Action

Throughout his essay, Introvigne's tone oscillates between legal analysis and moral outrage. His conclusion - "Silence is complicity" - is a direct challenge to the international community, including the United Nations and global human rights NGOs. He demands a firm response: investigation, condemnation, and advocacy. The slogan "Free Mother Han! Free Pastor Son!" is not mere rhetoric but a moral imperative, encapsulating the defense of freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and the rule of law itself.



Is South Korea copying China? here, from a Falun Dafa parade in Berlin in 2007, portraying persecution of Falun Gong members in China.

For activists supporting the [Family Federation](#) and religious liberty, Introvigne's article offers more than a report - it provides a framework for mobilization. It underscores the necessity of international solidarity among believers and human rights defenders. The cases of [Mother Han](#) and Pastor Son highlight that religious persecution can arise even in advanced democracies when governments allow ideology and expedience to override justice.

Why It Matters

What makes Introvigne's analysis particularly powerful is its recognition that the persecution of one faith endangers all. The erosion of due process for unpopular religious minorities sets a precedent that can later be used against anyone. If an 82-year-old spiritual leader can be interrogated for 25 hours and a pastor jailed for urging citizens to vote their conscience, then the democratic foundations of South Korea itself are at risk. This is not merely a crisis of two individuals - it is a crisis of principle.

Conclusion

Dr. Massimo Introvigne's "[Free Mother Han! Free Pastor Son!](#)" is both a warning and a rallying cry. It exposes the profound moral contradiction of a democracy that persecutes religious figures under the guise of law, and it demands a global response grounded in compassion, justice, and truth. For those who stand for religious freedom, human dignity, and the sanctity of conscience, the message is clear: now is the time to speak out, organize, and defend the rights of all who suffer for their faith.

To remain silent in the face of such injustice is to permit the slow death of democracy itself. To speak, to act, and to demand justice is to affirm the universal truth that faith is not a crime - and freedom is not negotiable.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Free Mother Han! Free Pastor Son! Confronting South Korea's Crisis of Democracy

10/07/2025 MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

A+ | A-

The leader of the Family Federation and the respected pastor of Busan's Segero Church are not detained "according to Korean law" but in violation of it.

by Massimo Introvigne



Young members of the Family Federation sing for freedom and the release of Mother Han. From X.

On October 4, Chance Son, son of Pastor Son Hyun-bo, issued a sobering message: "My family went for a 10-minute visitation earlier today, my dad has caught the flu, and his voice is almost gone. He won't be able to get a prescription and medicine until about 10 days later. Please pray that his health doesn't get worse." This is not a dispatch from a totalitarian regime—it's from South Korea, a democracy that now seems to be testing the elasticity of that term.

Pastor Son is not alone. Mother Hak Ja Han Moon, the 82-year-old revered leader of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly the Unification Church), known to millions as the Mother of Peace, is also behind bars. Her treatment, as openly advertised by the prosecution, is nothing short of psychological warfare. According to [official statements reported by Korean media](#), she "first appeared on the 17th of last month [September] and was questioned for about 9 hours and 30 minutes, and then was questioned for 4 hours and 30 minutes and 10 hours and 20 minutes on the 24th and 29th of the same month, respectively." That's nearly 25 hours of interrogation in under two weeks. Her answers have not changed. The facts have not changed. What is changing is her health, her safety, and the credibility of South Korea's legal system.

Mother Han's case is [somewhat surreal](#). The charges suggest that she used church resources to support politicians, including the disgraced former President of South Korea, and improperly influenced elections. Yet no credible evidence has been presented to show that she personally directed such activities. The Family Federation has consistently maintained that Mother Han's role was spiritual, not political. The accusation that she orchestrated mass political enrollment of Family Federation members into the People Power Party (PPP), which is now in the opposition, has already collapsed under its own weight. The prosecution first claimed 110,000 members had joined en masse. That figure has now been [quietly revised to 3,500](#), as reported by local media. But this is only one thread in a tangled web of allegations.

The prosecution's strategy appears less about proving a coherent case and more about exhausting the accused. Interrogating an elderly religious leader with known health issues for nearly 25 hours over two weeks, despite consistent testimony, is not a pursuit of truth—it is psychological attrition. It violates both the spirit and the letter of international human rights law.



Pastors and elders in Busan ask for the release of Pastor Son, supported by Rob McCoy, longtime pastor of Godspoke Calvary Chapel in California.

Pastor Son's case is similarly distorted. He is accused of encouraging his congregation to **vote for PPP candidates**. Voting is a protected right in any democracy. Encouraging others to vote—especially for candidates that align with one's values—is not a crime. It's political speech. Yet Pastor Son has been jailed under the pretext that his sermons and church activities constituted illegal electioneering.

Even if one were to accept the prosecution's interpretation, precedent is damning to their case. In previous instances where religious figures were found to have breached electoral norms, the penalties were modest fines, not incarceration. What happens in Korea signals a shift from rule-of-law enforcement to ideological punishment.

President Lee, when confronted by President Trump during his U.S. visit about "vicious raids on churches," responded that the Korean judiciary acts according to Korean law. That statement is demonstrably false.

Under South Korean law, pre-trial detention is permitted only in cases of risk of flight or destruction of evidence. Mother Han has been stripped of her passport, and Pastor Son is a public figure with deep roots in Korea. Neither has attempted to flee. As for evidence, their churches and offices have been raided repeatedly. Computers, documents, phones—everything that could be seized has been seized. What remains to destroy? A hymn book?

Moreover, Korea is bound by international law. It has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which in Article 9 prohibits arbitrary detention and mandates that pre-trial detention be exceptional, not routine. These principles are elaborated in the UN Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (Tokyo Rules) and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules).

The Tokyo Rules emphasize that detention before trial should be used only when strictly necessary, and alternatives should be prioritized. They warn against using detention to extract confessions or punish individuals before conviction. The Nelson Mandela Rules mandate humane treatment of prisoners, access to medical care, and protection from psychological abuse. South Korea is violating both.

Let us be precise. The prolonged interrogations of Mother Han, despite her consistent testimony, are not a search for truth—they are psychological torture. Pastor Son's untreated health issues, in a facility that delays basic medical care for ten days, is not an oversight—it is neglect. These are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a broader crisis.

This crisis is not limited to religious leaders. Political figures have been arrested

This crisis is not limited to religious leaders. Political figures have been arrested. Protesters opposing President Lee's pro-China policies have faced intimidation and restrictions. The streets of Seoul have seen mass demonstrations, yet the government's response has been silence, surveillance, and suppression.

What we are witnessing is not just a legal overreach—it is a democratic backslide. The rule of law is being weaponized against dissent. Religious freedom is being redefined as a threat. Civic participation is being criminalized. And all of this is happening in a country that claims to be a beacon of democracy in East Asia.

The case of Mother Han also reveals a troubling transnational dimension. It is now evident that her arrest is part of a coordinated campaign between South Korea and Japan to dismantle the Family Federation. In March 2025, a first-degree court decision in Japan ordered the dissolution of the church—a ruling currently under appeal. The United Nations **has formally warned Japan** that such a move may violate international law. South Korea's treatment of Mother Han and other religious leaders may constitute even more serious violations. Arbitrary detention, coercive interrogation, and the criminalization of religious leadership are not only incompatible with democratic norms—they are incompatible with the international legal obligations Korea has pledged to uphold.

The international community must respond, the United Nations must investigate, and human rights organizations must speak out. Silence is complicity.

Friends of religious freedom and human dignity worldwide must rally around a simple, urgent cry: Free Mother Han! Free Pastor Son!

Because if democracy means anything, it must mean justice—even for those whose faith, voice, or conscience challenge the powers that be.

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Massimo Introvigne

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions ([CESNUR](#)), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#) and of the executive board of University of California Press' [Nova Religio](#). From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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