

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korean Special Prosecutors Became Political Tools

Knut Holdhus
January 11, 2026



South Korea's justice system facing a crisis



South Korea's largest English-language daily, The Korea Herald, published on 11th January an article by Jung Min-kyung headlined "[Korea wrapped up in 'special counsel war' amid justice system mistrust](#)".

South Korea's justice system faces a crisis of confidence as special counsel investigations now are becoming common, dominating the country's politics

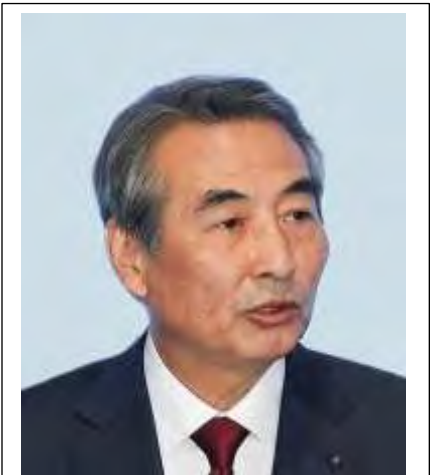
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Min Joong-gi, the head of a huge team of special prosecutors with extensive investigative powers. Image: Grok xAI

According to the [report](#), the country Korea is currently facing an intense political and legal confrontation that many observers describe as a "special counsel war". At its core, the dispute reflects a deepening crisis of trust in the country's justice system and a growing tendency for political parties to weaponize extraordinary legal mechanisms for partisan advantage.

While the term "special counsel" may be familiar to Western readers through U.S. politics, its role and implications in South Korea carry distinct historical, institutional, and political meanings that help explain why the current situation is so contentious.

In South Korea, a special counsel (or special prosecutor) is an independent investigator appointed by the National Assembly to examine cases that are considered too sensitive or politically charged to be handled by ordinary prosecutors. These investigations are typically reserved for exceptional circumstances, such as allegations involving sitting or former presidents, senior government officials, or powerful political networks. The logic behind this system is simple: when the public believes that prosecutors – who traditionally fall under the executive branch – cannot act impartially, an independent counsel is meant to restore credibility and

public confidence.



2024 logo of Democratic Party of South Korea



[Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)



Shincheonji Church of Jesus

However, what was once an extraordinary legal remedy is now at risk of becoming routine. According to the [reporting by The Korea Herald](#), South Korea's National Assembly has entered a phase in which rival political parties are proposing multiple, overlapping special counsel investigations at a rapid pace, even as the results of earlier probes are still being announced. This proliferation has led legal experts and political analysts to warn that the system is being distorted into a partisan tool rather than a safeguard of justice.

At the center of the current conflict are South Korea's two main political camps: the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and the main opposition People Power Party (PPP). In recent weeks, both sides have introduced or floated special counsel bills targeting a wide range of alleged misconduct. These proposals come on top of three recently concluded or ongoing special counsel investigations, creating a sense of legislative overload and political escalation.

Particularly striking is the fact that three pending special counsel bills are all related to the [Family Federation](#) – formerly called the [Unification Church](#). The [Federation](#), a religious organization with international reach, is currently facing allegations of involvement in unlawful political funding and election interference. According to [The Korea Herald](#), each bill has been drafted by a different political grouping, reflecting not consensus but competition over how far and how aggressively the investigations should go.

The ruling Democratic Party's proposal is the most expansive. It seeks to investigate not only the [Family Federation](#) but also the Shincheonji Church of Jesus [See editor's note below], a splinter Christian group that has previously been linked to political controversies. The bill targets alleged unlawful campaign donations, improper political influence, and election interference by these religious organizations.

A separate bill from the minor Rebuilding Korea Party narrows its focus to allegations of bribery and illicit donations involving politicians. Meanwhile, a joint proposal by the opposition People Power Party and the New Reform Party goes further by including alleged cover-ups and interference in earlier investigations related

to the [Family Federation](#).

Rather than consolidating these proposals or waiting for existing investigations to run their course, the ruling party has moved aggressively to push additional special counsel bills forward. On 8th January, the Democratic Party placed two major bills – one comprehensive special counsel bill and another specifically targeting the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji [See editor's note below] – on the agenda of the National Assembly's Legislation and Judiciary Committee. These bills were immediately referred to the committee's mediation panel, a procedural step that is usually reserved for contentious legislation.

Tensions escalated further when Democratic Party chair Rep. Jung Chung-rae (정청래) publicly suggested the possibility of yet another special counsel investigation – effectively a "third" comprehensive probe – before the second one had even begun. Speaking on a YouTube program on 6th January, Jung argued that if the second investigation proved insufficient, a follow-up "wrap-up" special counsel might be necessary. His remarks reinforced opposition claims that the ruling party is less interested in impartial fact-finding than in maintaining continuous political pressure through successive investigations.

[The Korea Herald](#) points out that under South Korea's parliamentary rules, a mediation or agenda coordination committee can deliberate on disputed bills for up to 90 days. However, if four of its six members vote in favor, a bill can be fast-tracked and sent directly to a plenary vote. Because the ruling party holds a numerical advantage in the Assembly, critics argue that this mechanism allows it to push through controversial legislation without meaningful bipartisan agreement.



Legal scholars have expressed alarm at this trend. Hwang Do-ssu (황도수), a law professor at Konkuk University, pointed out a fundamental contradiction in the ruling party's position. Special counsels, he explained, are appointed precisely because the public does not trust existing investigative authorities, particularly prosecutors. Yet the Democratic Party has long claimed that it has successfully reformed the prosecution by stripping it of excessive investigative powers and increasing its independence. If those reforms were effective, Hwang argues, then there should be no need for repeated special counsel investigations.

According to Hwang, this contradiction raises the troubling possibility that special counsels are being used not to compensate for institutional failure, but to engineer investigations that align with political objectives. In his view, such an approach risks turning the justice system into an instrument of populism, where legal processes are shaped by political narratives rather than

evidence and due process.

Political commentator Choi Jin (崔鎭), head of the Institute of Presidential Leadership in Seoul, echoed these concerns, describing the situation as a symptom of widespread public distrust in South Korea's core institutions. He noted that skepticism now extends beyond prosecutors to include the judiciary and the police, creating an environment in which extraordinary measures appear increasingly justified to the public – even when they may undermine institutional stability.



Aggressively promoting special counsel investigations: Lee Jae-myung, President of South Korea since June 4, 2025

As the National Assembly prepares for a plenary session scheduled for 15th January, the confrontation shows no signs of easing. The ruling party is expected to push forward with the special counsel bills regardless of opposition resistance. In response, the People Power Party has threatened to launch a full-scale filibuster to delay or block passage. Despite these efforts, most observers believe the bills will ultimately pass, given the ruling bloc's numerical advantage.

Perhaps the most significant concern raised by experts is that the original purpose of the special counsel system is being reversed. Traditionally, special counsels were demanded by opposition parties seeking to investigate those in power, based on the belief that ordinary prosecutors could not act independently. Now, in a striking inversion, it is the ruling party itself that is aggressively promoting special counsel investigations.

This shift, critics warn, could set a dangerous precedent. If special counsels become a standard governing tool rather than an exceptional safeguard, South Korea risks normalizing a cycle of perpetual investigations driven by political rivalry. For Western

observers, the situation offers a cautionary example of how legal mechanisms designed to protect democracy can, if overused or politicized, contribute to deeper institutional mistrust and prolonged political conflict rather than accountability and reform.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note: Shincheonji, officially known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation. Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has

received divine revelation to interpret it.]

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Peaceful Worship Treated As Crime In China

- January 10, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



Human rights group: Taiwanese Family Federation believer sentenced in Xiamen under China's "cult" law after organizing private worship services



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2026,
China Aid,
an

international Christian human rights organization focused on religious freedom and the rule of law in China, reported on the sentencing of a Taiwanese **Family Federation** believer in the large coastal city of Xiamen, Fujian Province. The case illustrates the continuing use of Communist China's criminal law to penalize unregistered religious activity and highlights the increasing risks faced by foreign and Taiwanese nationals engaged in faith-based activities on the mainland.



Location map of the city of Xiamen in Fujian province in China. Photo: Dagvidur / Uwe Dederig / Wikimedia Commons. License: **CC ASA 4.0 Int**

See also [China's New Crackdown: War on Foreign Christians](#)

According to **China Aid**, a married couple from Taiwan – Chang Pi-hsien and Lu Chia-chen – were subjected to criminal prosecution for their involvement with the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (formerly the **Unification Church**). While Chang Pi-hsien was released on bail pending trial in February 2025, his wife, Lu Chia-chen, has since been sentenced to one year and six months' imprisonment by the *Siming District People's Court* in Xiamen. Her sentence runs until July 12, 2026.

Publicly available information indicates that Lu Chia-chen first traveled to Xiamen in 2006 for employment and subsequently became a long-term resident. Beginning in 2018, she assumed a leadership role within the local **Family Federation** community. In this capacity, she regularly organized small religious gatherings in private homes, where participants engaged in prayer, hymn singing, study of texts of the **religious organization**, and the listening of sermons. These activities were conducted discreetly and, according to reports, had not previously been the subject of explicit warnings or prohibitions from local authorities.



Chinese crackdown on believers. Illustration: Grok xAI, 23rd May 2025

On 12th January 2025, police interrupted one such gathering and took Lu Chia-chen away for investigation. Several other attendees were also questioned, and the following day public security authorities issued formal detention notices. Multiple mainland Chinese participants were subsequently placed under detention. The sudden enforcement action marked a turning point, transforming what had been long-standing private religious meetings into a criminal case.

Chinese authorities accused both Lu Chia-chen and her husband of violating Article 300 of the *Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China*, commonly described as the offense of "using a cult organization to

undermine the implementation of the law". This provision is one of the most frequently invoked legal tools in cases involving religious groups deemed undesirable by the state. In practice, the charge does not require evidence that the accused actually obstructed specific laws or legal processes. Instead, once an organization is officially labeled a "cult" by the government, participation in or organization of its activities can itself be treated as sufficient grounds for criminal liability.

The **Family Federation** was placed on China's official list of "cult organizations" in 1997. For years, the **Federation** operated quietly in several Chinese cities, often avoiding public visibility. Its designation as a cult, however, has meant that any religious activity associated with it is vulnerable to prosecution under Article 300, regardless of whether such activity is peaceful or private.

China Aid notes that this case is not an isolated incident. In recent years, authorities have intensified enforcement actions against members of various Christian, Buddhist

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have intensified enforcement actions against members of various Christian, Buddhist, and other religious groups under similar charges, contributing to a steadily shrinking space for religious expression. The report also references separate incidents involving Taiwanese members of I-Kuan Tao, an indigenous religious movement, who were detained in Guangdong on suspicion of "organizing and using secret societies to undermine law enforcement".

Together, these cases underscore broader concerns about the expansive and ambiguous application of criminal law in matters of belief, particularly where foreign or cross-strait religious connections are involved. From the perspective of human rights advocates, the prosecution of Lu Chia-chen exemplifies how legal mechanisms designed to protect public order are increasingly used to suppress peaceful religious practice, raising serious questions about religious freedom and legal proportionality in contemporary Communist China.

According to its website, [ChinaAid](#) has for 20 years "worked to expose human rights abuses and promote truth, justice and freedom by advocating for religious freedom". The organization was founded by Bob (Xiqiu) Fu who was a student leader during the famous Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 when according to Red Cross figures more than 2,000 democracy activists were killed by the Communist regime. For the last 20 years, [ChinaAid](#) has been based in Midland, Texas, USA.

See also [China's New Crackdown: War on Foreign Christians](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Lu Chia-chen (left) and Chang Pi-hsien. Photo: Private

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Bob Fu testifying about religious liberty issues before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee 2nd October 2018. Photo: United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary. Public domain image

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