

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Mother Han and the War for Religion in S Korea

Knut Holdhus
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Mother Han being wheelchaired to court. Illustration: ChatGPT

Mother Han trial fuels debate over lawfare and religious organizations as case highlights legal and political battle over religion in South Korea



The South Korean news agency [Yonhap News](#) (연합뉴스) reported on 10th July on the final hearing in the court case against [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), co-founder of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea also known as [Unificationism](#) (통일교). The [article](#) by Lee Yeong-seop (이영섭) mentions that prosecutors reiterated their request that the religious leader - also called [Mother Han](#) - be sentenced to a total of 13 years in prison for charges related to alleged political-religious collusion (정교유착) involving the Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) administration. The Seoul Central District Court is expected to deliver its judgment on 31st August.



Yoon Yeong-ho, former director general of the international headquarters of the [Family Federation](#), February 11, 2022

The [Yonhap report](#) describes how in their closing arguments, [Mother Han](#)'s legal team firmly rejected the prosecution's case, maintaining that all of the alleged wrongdoing was carried out independently by former executive [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호). According to the defense, [Mother Han](#) neither authorized nor participated in the alleged criminal acts. Her lawyers argued that the prosecution's case relies almost entirely on [Yoon](#)'s testimony, while noting that he declined to answer many questions concerning the alleged conspiracy and that the statements he did provide were inconsistent and contradictory.

The [Yonhap article](#) points out that [Mother Han](#)'s attorneys further asserted that [Yoon](#) himself conceived, organized, and executed the relevant activities, occasionally directing other individuals without [Mother Han](#)'s knowledge. According to the defense, [Yoon](#) frequently acted on his own initiative in order to enhance his personal standing within the [religious organization](#) and only informed [Mother Han](#) afterward when his efforts proved successful. They contended that he is now attempting to transfer responsibility for his own actions onto her.

The defense also challenged the legality of the prosecution itself. It argued that several of the allegations exceeded the statutory authority granted to the special prosecutor. In this context, the claim means that the defense believes the special prosecutor investigated offenses that were outside the specific mandate established by law or by the appointment order creating the special investigation. If accepted by the court, evidence relating to those matters could potentially be excluded or the corresponding charges dismissed because the prosecutor allegedly acted beyond the scope of the authorized investigation.

In addition, the defense asserted that some of the prosecution's evidence had been obtained unlawfully. This refers to the argument that investigators may have collected evidence in violation of procedural safeguards - for example, through searches, seizures, or other investigative measures that allegedly failed to comply with legal requirements. Under South Korean criminal procedure, evidence found to have been obtained illegally may, in certain circumstances, be ruled inadmissible at trial.



Lee Myung-bak - President of South Korea 2008 - 2013. Photo (2010)



Park Geun-hye - President of South Korea 2013 - 2017. Photo (2013)

According to [Yonhap News](#), in her final statement, [Mother Han](#) said,

"I am deeply saddened that the person I trusted and entrusted with everything has brought about today's situation."

The news agency also quotes her as saying,

"As the leader of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), I sincerely apologize for having unintentionally caused public controversy."

[Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호) rejected the defense's portrayal of events, insisting that no amount of distortion or criticism could obscure the truth. He further accused [Unificationism](#) leaders of coordinating testimony and attempting to shield the [organization](#) by placing sole responsibility on him.

A review of South Korea's democratic history shows that religion has periodically intersected with politics under several administrations. During the presidency of Lee Myung-bak (이명박, 2008-2013), the government faced accusations of favoring Protestant Christianity. Under Park Geun-hye (박근혜, 2013-2017), the extraordinary influence of a religiously connected confidante became a central element of the corruption scandal that ultimately led to her impeachment.

What distinguishes the current left-leaning administration of Lee Jae-myung (이재명) is the convergence of several developments: multiple simultaneous investigations involving different religious organizations, allegations that these groups sought to influence party politics and elections in systematic ways, and an administration that has made the eradication of alleged political-religious collusion a major enforcement priority.

Critics contend, however, that one notable feature of this campaign is that it has focused almost exclusively on religious organizations perceived as conservative and on conservative

politicians. They point to the case of Jeon Jae-soo (전재수), a prominent member of President Lee's Democratic Party, whose [case was closed](#) without charges being filed.

Conservative critics, particularly within the People Power Party, argue that this pattern reflects unequal treatment. They contend that ruling-party figures benefit from prosecutorial discretion, while opposition politicians are subjected to more aggressive investigations. Following the [closure of Jeon's case](#), complaints alleging misconduct by the joint investigation team were also filed.

Regardless of whether these allegations ultimately prove justified, it is difficult to dispute that the politically most consequential ongoing investigations have disproportionately involved conservative politicians and organizations.

Further intensifying the controversy is the Lee administration's proposal to amend the Civil Act through legislation officially titled the Partial Amendment to the Civil Act, but referred to by critics as the

Religious Organization Dissolution Act or the Church Dissolution Act.



*Prominent politician in governing party cleared: Jeon Jae-soo.
Photo (2023)*

About the proposed new law: [Vague New Law, Broad Powers: Concerns Mount](#)

According to the administration, the amendment is intended to curb what it describes as "systemic political intervention" by religious organizations. If enacted, it would grant administrative authorities broad powers to audit religious organizations, suspend their activities, revoke their legal status, and transfer their assets to the national treasury if they are found to have violated the constitutional principle of the separation of religion and state.

Under such a framework, a finding of political-religious collusion could potentially result in the dissolution of an entire [religious organization](#). For that reason, critics argue that the case against [Mother Han](#) extends well beyond its immediate legal issues. In their view, it has become a test case for a broader strategy of using legal proceedings to weaken or eliminate politically disfavored religious organizations - a perspective that has led an increasing number of observers to describe the case as

an example of "lawfare".

See also [Editorial Challenges Prosecution of Mother Han](#)

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concepts and is influenced by social prejudice against a minority religion

The conservative Korean newspaper *Segye Ilbo* published on 10th July 2026, an editorial on the court case against **Hak Ja Han** (한학자), the leader of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* – in Korea, also known as *Unificationism* (통일교).



See also *Mother Han: Beyond One Trial – the Wider Stakes*

The paper argues that the outcome should be decided solely on the basis of evidence and legal reasoning rather than public prejudice toward a minority religion. The editorial is clearly an opinion piece critical of the special prosecutors asking for a veritable “death sentence” for the octogenarian religious leader – 13 years behind bars. **Hak Ja Han** – also called **Mother Han** – turned 83 last February and has been kept in detention since September last year. During her stay in a tiny cell, her health has significantly deteriorated.

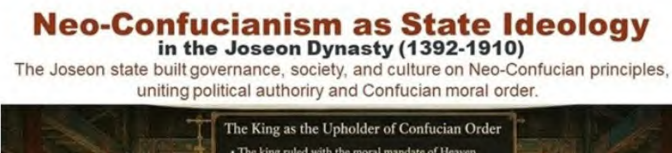
To understand the article, it is helpful to look at several Korean political and legal concepts that may not be familiar to international readers.



He was given life sentence, she 4 years in what some perceive as revenge on political opponents: Former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and First Lady Kim Keon-hee, here in Tokyo 16th March 2023. Photo: 首相官邸ホームページ / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 4.0 Int. Cropped

The immediate context is that special prosecutors investigating corruption allegations involving Kim Keon-hee (김건희), the wife of former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (윤석열), requested a 13-year prison sentence for **Mother Han**. According to the prosecution, she was involved in unlawful political funding and sought to influence the presidential office through intermediaries regarding matters affecting the *Family Federation*. **Mother Han** has denied all allegations.

The editorial criticizes the prosecution's case, arguing that it reflects longstanding prejudice against what Koreans call a “minority religion” (*sosu jonggyo*, 소수 종교). In Korea, this expression does not simply mean a religion with relatively few members. It also carries the implication that such groups are often viewed with suspicion and are sometimes labeled as *saibi* (사이비), a word often translated as “cult”, “pseudo-religion”, or “heretical sect”. Although *saibi* is commonly used in everyday Korean, it is not a legal classification but a socially loaded and frequently pejorative term. The editorial argues that such attitudes have unfairly influenced both public opinion and the prosecution.





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The clearest historical example of unity of political authority and religious or ideological authority – *jeonggyo ilchi* – 정교일치 (政教一致) – in Korea is the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), though with an important qualification: the “religion” was Neo-Confucianism, which is often described as both a philosophy and a state ideology rather than a religion in the Western sense. Illustration: ChatGPT, 11th July 2026, edited.

One of the prosecution's most striking allegations is that **Mother Han** sought to achieve *jeonggyo ilchi* (정교일치), literally “the unity of politics and religion”. This phrase requires particular explanation because it has a much stronger meaning in Korean than the English expression “close church-state relations”.

Historically, *jeonggyo ilchi* refers to a political system in which religious authority and state authority are effectively united. The classic example is a theocracy, where religious leaders exercise supreme political power or where the state is constitutionally organized around a particular religion. The editorial cites Iran as an example because its Constitution establishes an Islamic political system headed by a Supreme Leader chosen from among senior Shi’a clerics.

The **editorial** argues that applying this concept to the **Family Federation** is implausible. Since the **movement** represents only a small percentage of South Korea’s population, the authors contend that it could not realistically aspire to establish a theocratic state. They further note that creating such a system would require constitutional amendments, making the accusation appear exaggerated. In the **editorial**'s view, the prosecution has stretched the concept of *jeonggyo ilchi* beyond its ordinary meaning in order to make the charges appear more serious.

Another issue concerns the allegation that **Mother Han** sought political favors from associates of Kim Keon-hee(김건희). According to the editorial, the prosecution characterizes ordinary expressions of goodwill – such as asking public officials to “please support us” or “help us” – as illegal lobbying. The authors argue that these expressions are common forms of polite speech in Korean and do not necessarily imply an improper request for official action. They therefore suggest that the prosecution has adopted an overly broad interpretation of Korea’s anti-corruption laws.

The **Segye Ilbo editorial** also disputes allegations that **Mother Han** personally embezzled **Family Federation** funds. Here, the discussion turns to the organizational structure of religious corporations in Korea. **Mother Han** is described as the **movement**'s “spiritual leader” rather than its financial administrator. According to the defense presented in court, administrative and financial decisions are handled by professional officials within the **organization**'s world headquarters, while **Mother Han** provides religious guidance and overall vision.

The **editorial** argues that this division of responsibilities resembles the governance of many other religious organizations and that prosecutors have incorrectly treated the **Family Federation** as though it were an ordinary commercial corporation with direct executive control vested in its president.



A constitution that guarantees freedom of religion: *The Constitution of the Republic of Korea.* Here, the first version enacted in 1948. Photo: NZ 토끼들 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#)

Throughout the [editorial](#) runs a broader constitutional argument. The authors emphasize that freedom of religion is one of the fundamental rights guaranteed by South Korea's Constitution, alongside freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and privacy. They argue that constitutional equality before the law applies equally to both large and small religious communities. In their view, a religious organization should not face harsher treatment simply because it has relatively few adherents or because it is socially unpopular.

The [editorial](#) concludes by connecting [Mother Han](#)'s case with a broader political debate taking place in South Korea. It refers to a proposed amendment to the Civil Act that critics have nicknamed the “*Religious Corporation Dissolution Act*”. The proposal would allow the government to revoke the legal status of religious corporations that violate the constitutional principle of separation between religion and the state by improperly intervening in politics.

Supporters argue that the measure would strengthen accountability and preserve political neutrality among religious organizations. The [editorial](#), however, interprets the proposal very differently. It argues that the legislation could discourage religious leaders from speaking publicly on political or social issues, effectively silencing religious voices in public life. For that reason, the authors describe it rhetorically as an “*anti-free speech law for religious organizations*”, suggesting that it would have a chilling effect on constitutionally protected religious freedom.

Taken together, the [editorial](#) presents a consistent argument: that [Hak Ja Han](#)'s prosecution reflects broader social prejudice against minority religions, that prosecutors have employed unusually expansive interpretations of legal concepts such as “unity of politics and religion” and political solicitation, and that courts should disregard public opinion and decide the case solely on the basis of evidence and established legal principles.

FATES OF SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENTS

- Syngman Rhee (in office 1948-1960) – **Exile in Hawaii until death**
- Yun Bo-seon (1960-1962) – **Convicted of treason**
- Park Chung-hee (1963-1979) – **Assassinated**
- Choi Kyu-hah (1979-1980) – **Forced out by coup**
- Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988) – **Death sentence, pardoned**
- Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993) – **Jailed, pardoned**
- Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) – **Son jailed**
- Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) – **Aides investigated**
- Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) – **Suicide during probe**
- Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) – **Jailed, pardoned**
- Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) – **Impeached, jailed, pardoned**
- Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) – **Aides probed**
- Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2025) – **Life imprisonment**

Now, also religious organizations having supported former presidents are in danger: *South Korea has a long, almost uncanny pattern of post-presidency trouble – enough that some Koreans joke there's a “curse” on the Blue House. Each new administration often tries to “clean house” by prosecuting the previous one. The presidency in South Korea has immense influence, making both abuse and backlash more likely. This has created a cycle: leaders push legal or moral boundaries while in office, then political opponents pursue them once they step down.* Illustration: Knut Holdhus

Whether or not one agrees with these conclusions,

understanding the [article](#) requires appreciating the distinctive meanings that Korean legal and political terminology carries, as well as the country's longstanding persecution of new religious movements and tendency once governing power changes hands, to harshly punish political opponents and anyone supporting them.

See also [Mother Han: Beyond One Trial – the Wider Stakes](#)

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Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: Comparable fates: Jesus of Nazareth and Mother Han. Illustration: ChatGPT, 10th July 2026

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