

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: USA Probes Recent Restriction on Religious Freedom in S Korean and Japan

Knut Holdhus
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Japan's Supreme Court and South Korea's National Assembly making decisions affecting freedom of religion. Illustration: ChatGPT

Religious freedom in Japan and South Korea under U.S. scrutiny following arrests of Korean faith leaders and attempt by current left-leaning administration to pass new anti-religious law

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Religious Leaders Face Arrests as U.S. Officials Investigate

Religious Freedom Under Pressure in Japan and South Korea

by editorial staff of the [Sekai Nippo](#) [See editor's note below]

Lee Man-hee (95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth)

Japan and South Korea are both prosperous, successful democracies and key allies of the United States. However, concerns have recently been raised as both countries have shown increasing signs of restricting religious freedom.

In June, Japan's [Supreme Court dismissed](#) a [special appeal](#) filed by the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) against the government's [March 2025 dissolution order](#). As a result, the dissolution of the [religious organization](#) has become final.

A similar trend is unfolding in South Korea. The Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration has placed [several Christian church leaders under investigation](#) on various charges, and the National Assembly is currently deliberating legislation that would grant the government the authority to dissolve churches.

On 24th June, [Lee Man-hee](#) (이만희 - 95), founder of the conservative Christian church Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (Shincheonji), was [arrested](#) on suspicion of coercing church

members to engage in political activities.

At the end of last year, Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of Busan Segyero Church (세계로교회) was [imprisoned for several months](#) for violating the Public Official Election Act after leading demonstrations opposing President Lee Jae-myung (이재명).



In addition, [Hak Ja Han](#) ((한학자 - 83), president of the [Family Federation](#), has been [detained since September](#) of last year on bribery charges related to allegedly giving luxury handbags and other gifts to former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희). [Han](#) denies the allegations but is [currently hospitalized](#) due to heart disease, glaucoma, and injuries sustained in a fall. She may be returned to custody once she recovers.

On 10th July, prosecutors [requested a sentence of 13 years'](#) imprisonment for [Han](#).

These cases have intensified debate over where the boundary should be drawn between religion and politics.

In South Korea, independent lawmaker Choi Hyuk-jin (최혁진) introduced a [bill](#) on 9th January of this year to partially amend the Civil Code. South Korean media have dubbed it the "[Church](#)

[Dissolution Act](#)" because of its contents.

The backdrop to the [legislation](#) is the declaration of martial law by then-President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) in December 2024, which led to the collapse of his administration. Since the Lee administration took office, a series of investigations has targeted individuals connected to the former Yoon government.

If enacted, the [bill](#) would give the South Korean government the authority to dissolve religious organizations, seize their assets, and regulate their religious activities. Those opposing the [bill](#) are seeking support both domestically and internationally.



The conservative opposition People Power Party told The Washington Times,

"Freedom of religion is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution, and we will do everything in our power to prevent the enactment of the '[Church Dissolution Act](#).'"

The party's leader, Jang Dong-hyeok (장동혁), also told the foreign press corps,

"Like other democratic nations, South Korea recognizes every citizen's freedom of religion. However, under the Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration, this important value has been seriously undermined."

Earlier this month, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Riley Barnes, acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for DRL Julie Turner, White House Faith Office liaison Belsis Romero, and embassy officials

visited Busan Segyero Church (세계로교회) and met with Pastor Son. The findings of their investigation are expected to be included in a report scheduled for publication later this year.

Chance Son (찬스 손), the pastor's son, explained that "the momentum behind the [bill](#) has temporarily stalled," but that it remains under review by the National Assembly's Legislation and Judiciary Committee. He added, "If the [bill](#) begins moving forward again, we will respond swiftly in accordance with biblical teachings."

(Seoul / Special Correspondent for The Washington Times)

[Editor's note: The [Sekai Nippo article](#) is an abridged and lightly edited Japanese adaptation of a report by Andrew Salmon published in The Washington Times 10th July titled "[America's leading Asian allies pummel freedom of religion](#)".]

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The Contradictions Of The Dissolution Order

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An irrational decision with dangerous consequences: Christian leader points out the fundamental contradictions of the dissolution order against the Family Federation

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[Opinion]

Dissolution Order and the Supreme Court's Decision Confirm the Continued Existence of the Family Federation as a Religious Organization

by Rev. Hiroshi Kurose 黒瀬博, Tokyo West Baptist Church

Part 2 (final)

See part 1: [Corporation Dissolved – Organization Remains](#)

An Irrational Judicial Decision



Pastor Hiroshi Kurose (黒瀬博) of the Tokyo West Baptist Church.
Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

The Supreme Court confirmed that the [religious organization](#) continues to exist. Therefore, it is only natural that the [liquidator](#) should conduct the [liquidation](#) process in a manner that does not infringe upon the [religious organization's](#) freedom of religion.

At present, however, the [liquidator](#) has seized all of the [Family Federation's](#) [places of worship](#). Since such facilities



No more access to hundreds of its own buildings: Here, the property housing the [Family Federation](#) in North Hamamatsu, a city on the South coast on the main island of Honshu, Japan. Photo: IXTA9839 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#)

are indispensable to religious activity, they should immediately be returned to the [Family Federation](#).

Likewise, [cemeteries](#) and memorial parks owned by the [Family Federation](#) constitute religious ritual property and therefore should not be subject to liquidation. Selling them would be unlawful, and the seizures should immediately cease, with management transferred to related [Family Federation](#) organizations.

Many commentators have already pointed out flaws in the Court's reasoning. I would further point out that the practical results are equally unreasonable.

The [dissolution order](#) was issued on the grounds that the [Family Federation's](#) aggressive solicitation of donations constituted unlawful conduct and that similar unlawful

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conduct might continue in the future.

Yet the dissolution order applies only to the religious corporation while allowing the [religious organization](#) to continue.

What has happened since? The [religious organization](#) continues collecting donations just as before. Since this is legally permissible, no one condemns it or calls it unlawful.

What does this mean? It means that donation practices carried out after the [decision](#) are legal, while essentially the same conduct before the [decision](#) was deemed unlawful.

This obvious self-contradiction lies at the heart of the [dissolution order](#).

The Court also stated that “there is no effective means other than a dissolution order to prevent aggressive fundraising.” Yet in reality the [decision](#) has done nothing to prevent such fundraising.

This is the kind of irrational decision currently being handed down by the courts.

As I have argued before, religious corporations possess legal personality and therefore possess legal rights. It is thus possible to compare a religious corporation to an individual person.

Suppose an individual committed a civil wrong. Instead of ordering that person to compensate the victim for the damages caused, imagine a court stripped the individual of all property and transferred any remaining assets to someone else.

Suppose the court then justified this by saying: “The individual is still alive and able to function, so there is no constitutional problem.”

Such reasoning would be absurd.

Yet that is essentially what has happened through this [dissolution order](#).

The Liquidator Must Follow the Law

Although the [dissolution order](#) has become final, the [liquidation](#) of the [organization](#)'s assets still remains.

The [liquidator](#) is currently disposing of assets, but naturally must comply with the law.

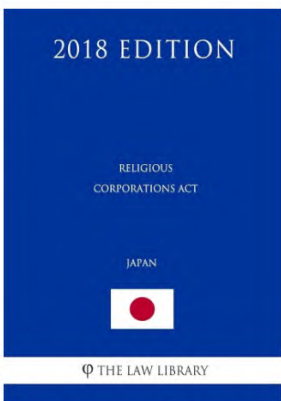
Under Article 49-5 of the *Religious Corporations Act*, if the religious corporation cannot fully satisfy its debts, bankruptcy proceedings must begin. At that point, the [liquidator](#)'s duties end, and responsibility passes to the bankruptcy trustee.

Thus, the [liquidator](#)'s authority is limited. Under Article 49-2, those duties consist only of:

- completing ongoing business,
- collecting claims and paying debts, and
- transferring any remaining assets.

The most important of these is the payment of debts.

The [liquidator](#) is currently inviting creditors to file claims through public notice. However, donations are not debts. The same is true of charitable gifts, religious offerings, and gifts generally. If such contributions could routinely be reclaimed as debts, ordinary economic and social activity would become impossible.



*Front page of 2018 English version of **Religious Corporations Act** of Japan.*

Accordingly, only illegal donations could become subjects of [liquidation](#).

However, the [liquidator](#) has no authority to determine whether a donation was illegal. [Liquidation](#) concerns established claims and debts; the law does not authorize the [liquidator](#) to decide questions of legality.

How, then, should this be handled?

Each individual case must be decided by a court. Only after a court, having considered all of the circumstances, issues a judgment recognizing a claim for repayment does a donation become a legally enforceable debt that the [liquidator](#) may process.

If the [liquidator](#) makes that determination independently without a court judgment, it exceeds the scope of the [liquidator's](#) authority and could itself lead to legal sanctions.



In Katashina Village, Gunma Prefecture: Oze Cemetery, owned by the [Family Federation](#). Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

The [liquidator](#) has already seized the [Family Federation's](#) worship facilities.

This may itself be unlawful.

Although the [court's decision](#) appears to authorize such action, anyone reading Article 1 of the *Religious Corporations Act* can readily see that conducting religious ceremonies lies at the core of freedom of religion.

The statute expressly states that it “shall not be interpreted so as to restrict” religious freedom.

Given that language, seizing worship facilities violates the law.

Even now it is not too late.

The [liquidator](#) should immediately reopen the [worship facilities](#) to the [Family Federation](#) and cease interfering with religious services.

Article 188 of the Penal Code must also be considered.

That provision criminalizes interference with religious worship. If the [liquidator seizes places of worship](#) and thereby prevents believers from worshipping, this may constitute a criminal offense.

Allowing worship services to continue would not interfere with the [liquidation](#) process.

The [liquidator](#) should not obstruct freedom of religion in matters unrelated to [liquidation](#) duties.

For this reason as well, the [worship facilities](#) should promptly be returned – or at minimum reopened – to the [Family Federation](#).

The [Supreme Court's decision](#) has made the [dissolution order](#) final. At the same time, it has clearly established that the [religious organization](#) itself has not been dissolved.

Accordingly, we must continue to speak out so that the spirit of the *Religious Corporations Act* – which respects the religious activities and freedom of religion of religious organizations – is not ignored.

See part 1: [Corporation Dissolved – Organization Remains](#)

Featured image above: The Japanese constitution, the scales of justice, the Family Federation logo, and the entrance to one its nearly 300 places of worship taken by the state throughout the country. Illustration: ChatGPT, 14th July 2026.

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