

Knut Holdhus
July 29, 2026



Calls for equal investigation. Illustration: ChatGPT

서울신문

Seoul Shinmun

더불어

민주당

Allegations of selective justice as religion-politics collusion involving politicians from the opposition People Power Part (PPP) have been investigated aggressively, while politicians from the governing Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) have not been examined thoroughly. here, the 2024 logo of South Korea's Democratic Party - Minjudang.

Double standard? Seoul editorial warns against selective justice and calls for investigators to apply the same standard to all parties in probe into alleged religious lobbying

A growing political controversy in South Korea is raising questions about whether investigations into alleged links between religious organizations and political parties are being conducted impartially. An [editorial](#) published by the daily Seoul Shinmun (서울신문) on 29th July argues that investigators have pursued allegations involving opposition politicians aggressively while showing far less urgency when similar claims concern the governing Democratic Party.

The debate centers on the work of a Joint Investigation Headquarters (합동수사본부), a task force made up of prosecutors and police officers. The body was established to examine allegations that major religious organizations sought to influence politics through lobbying, financial contributions, or organized party membership. Two religious movements have received particular attention: the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea generally referred to as [Unificationism](#) (통일교) - and Shincheonji Church of Jesus [See

editor's note below]. Both have faced accusations that some of their members or officials attempted to build political influence, although the specific allegations differ from case to case.

According to [Seoul Shinmun](#), one of South Korea's oldest newspapers, the concern is not simply whether these allegations are true, but whether investigators are applying the same standards regardless of which political party may be affected.

The [newspaper](#) notes that investigators reportedly obtained testimony four months earlier from a former Shincheonji [See editor's note below] member who claimed that a youth leader within the movement had encouraged members to join not only the conservative People Power Party but also the liberal Democratic Party. While investigators are said to have secured this statement, the [editorial](#) claims they did not follow up by thoroughly examining possible Democratic Party involvement.

This alleged lack of action contrasts sharply with the task force's earlier handling of the People Power Party. In February, investigators searched the party's headquarters as part of an investigation into claims that Shincheonji [See editor's note below] members had joined the party in an organized manner. Despite

strong political objections, authorities obtained party membership records and later indicted Shincheonji [See editor's note below] Chairman Lee Man-hee (이만희) and others on charges including violations of the Political Parties Act and obstruction of business.

The [editorial](#) argues that such energetic action toward the opposition creates an unavoidable perception of unfairness if comparable allegations involving the governing party are not investigated with equal determination.



The [newspaper](#) also recalls another [controversial decision](#) involving the [Family Federation](#). In April, investigators decided not to refer Busan Mayor Jeon Jae-soo (전재수) for prosecution over allegations that he had received money or other benefits from the [Family Federation](#). Authorities explained that the statute of limitations had expired and that the available evidence was insufficient. Although that decision itself may have been legally justified, Seoul Shinmun suggests that the latest questions surrounding the Shincheonji [See editor's note below] investigation contribute to a broader impression of inconsistent enforcement.

At the center of the [editorial](#) is the argument that investigators have not adequately explained why testimony obtained months earlier concerning the Democratic Party apparently remained dormant. Even though authorities have reportedly opened a separate investigation more recently, the newspaper maintains that this does not answer the central question of why no

meaningful follow-up occurred after the original testimony was secured.

To understand the political background, it is important to know that South Korea has spent several years debating how alleged ties between religious organizations and politicians should be investigated. Lawmakers originally discussed appointing a special prosecutor to examine claims involving both the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji [See editor's note below]. However, political parties could not reach agreement over the scope of such an investigation - particularly whether Shincheonji should be included. As negotiations stalled, the government instead established the current Joint Investigation Headquarters to examine allegations involving religious influence on politics.

The [editorial](#) contends that the task force therefore carries a particularly important responsibility. Rather than focusing on one religious organization or one political party, it is expected to examine all credible allegations of improper relationships between religious groups and political figures. These could include accusations of political lobbying, the provision of money or gifts to public officials, or efforts to influence elections by encouraging members to join particular political parties.



The issue has also begun affecting politics within the Democratic Party itself. Ahead of the party's leadership election scheduled for 17th August, leading candidate and former Prime Minister Kim Min-seok (김민석) publicly questioned why no special investigation into Shincheonji [See editor's note below] had ever materialized. His remarks criticized the previous party leadership and highlighted growing internal disagreements over how the controversy has been handled.

In its conclusion, [Seoul Shinmun](#) argues that public confidence in the investigation depends on investigators demonstrating complete political neutrality. Whether allegations concern the [Family Federation](#), Shincheonji [See editor's note below], the governing Democratic Party, or the opposition People Power Party, the newspaper maintains that the same investigative standards should apply. Only an investigation conducted without political exceptions, the editorial concludes, can avoid accusations that justice is being administered selectively rather than impartially.

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. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the Book of Revelation are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

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Religion As Campaign Weapons In Leadership Race

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Victim of religious finger-pointing in South Korean governing party leadership race: Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Here, its logo.



Victim of religious finger-pointing in governing party leadership race: Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. Here its logo

As South Korea's

governing Democratic Party prepares to elect a new party leader at its national convention on 17th August, the leadership race has become increasingly bitter. What began as a contest over political direction has now evolved into an exchange of accusations involving two of the country's best-known new religious movements: Shincheonji [See editor's note below] and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification – in Korea generally known as Unificationism (통일교).

See also Double Standard in Religion-Politics Probe?

The controversy reflects a familiar pattern in South Korean politics. Persecuted religious organizations are often invoked during election campaigns, not necessarily because of proven institutional involvement, but because allegations of religious connections can become effective political weapons. In the current contest, supporters of each candidate are accusing the opposing side of benefiting from such religious ties.

According to a report by JoongAng Ilbo (중앙일보) reporter Oh So-yeong (오소영), published on 24th July, developments in an ongoing investigation classified as criminal have intensified these political attacks.



At the center of the dispute is a probe into allegations that members of Shincheonji [See editor's note below], a rapidly growing Christian new religious movement, collectively joined the Democratic Party during the 3rd June local elections. Investigators from a joint police-prosecution task force are said to have uncovered evidence suggesting that Shincheonji [See editor's note below] encouraged members in the Seoul metropolitan area to register as Democratic Party members.



Kim Min-seok, Prime Minister of South Korea from July 2025 to June 2026. Photo: [텔레민주 \[더블 어민주당\]](#) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 3.0 Unp](#). Cropped

If confirmed, such coordinated party enrollment could raise questions about attempts to influence internal party elections rather than general national elections. The reported findings appear to lend support to claims made by former Prime Minister Kim Min-seok (김민석), one of the candidates competing for the party leadership.

The JoongAng Ilbo article mentions that earlier in July, Kim publicly vowed to uncover what he described as Shincheonji's interference in Democratic Party politics. He argued that the leadership



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contest had become entangled in an alliance involving anti-Lee Jae-myung (이재명) forces, factional divisions within the party, and Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#). His remarks immediately became one of the most controversial issues of the campaign.

Initially, Democratic Party officials attempted to dismiss the allegations. Party spokesperson Kang Jun-hyeon (강준현) stated that a review of party membership records conducted last December had not produced meaningful evidence linking members' addresses to any particular religious organization. However, reports that investigators had now identified possible evidence of organized recruitment weakened that earlier reassurance.

The investigation has placed supporters of Kim's principal rival, former Democratic Party leader Jeong Cheong-rae (정청래), under growing political pressure. Although there has been no public evidence directly connecting Jeong himself to the alleged activities, members of his political camp have responded forcefully.

Lawmakers aligned with Jeong accused Kim of making irresponsible claims without sufficient evidence. During a press conference, they argued that if Kim could not substantiate his allegations, he should withdraw from the leadership race. They also criticized him for encouraging investigations that, in their view, benefited the conservative opposition *People's Power Party*.



Portrait of **Jeong Cheong-rae** (Jung Chung-rae) in June 2026. Photo: [델리민주 \[더불어민주당\]](#) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

Kim's supporters quickly responded. Representative Chae Hyun-il (채현일), a close political ally, accused Jeong's camp of damaging party unity by acting primarily as defenders of their preferred candidate rather than seeking the truth about the allegations.

Meanwhile, Jeong attempted to strike a more cautious tone. Through social media, he called for a thorough investigation regardless of who might be involved and urged authorities to disclose the results as soon as possible. Nevertheless, some lawmakers close to Jeong privately acknowledged that they would have to wait and see what evidence investigators ultimately release.

Others expressed frustration over what they viewed as selective leaks from the investigation. Representative Choi Min-hee (최민희) questioned who was providing confidential investigative information to the media and urged investigators to complete their work promptly rather than allowing speculation based on vague references to "circumstantial evidence."

As accusations involving Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#) dominated the political debate, supporters of Jeong launched a counterattack directed at Kim himself. Instead of focusing on Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#), they raised questions about Kim's past contacts with the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification*.

Posts circulating within online communities sympathetic to Jeong pointed out that Kim had attended a Peace Road health walking event in June 2024. Peace Road is an organization that promotes the proposed [Korea–Japan undersea tunnel project](#) and has long been associated with organizations connected to the [Family Federation](#). The posts also noted that Kim's son had graduated from a high school operated by a foundation affiliated with [Unificationism](#).

These facts were presented by Kim's critics as evidence of inconsistency. They argued that while Kim was portraying Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#) as a political threat, he himself had participated in an event linked to [another religious movement](#) that has frequently been the subject of controversy in South Korea and Japan.

One online post summarized this criticism by asking why Kim was declaring an all-out struggle against Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#) while having personally attended a [Family Federation](#)-related event, and questioned whether he was turning the party convention into a “muddy battlefield” of mutual accusations.

The [article](#) does not suggest that attendance at the Peace Road event or having a family member educated at a school operated by a [Family Federation](#)-affiliated foundation demonstrates any improper relationship with the [religious movement](#). Rather, it illustrates how such associations are being employed as political ammunition during an increasingly acrimonious leadership contest.

The [JoongAng Ilbo report](#) portrays a Democratic Party convention in which substantive policy debates risk being overshadowed by investigations, factional rivalries, and competing attempts to portray political opponents as linked to persecuted religious organizations. Whether the ongoing investigation ultimately substantiates the allegations concerning Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#) remains to be seen, but the controversy has already transformed the party leadership race into one in which religion has become a central – and highly contentious – political issue.

See also [Double Standard in Religion-Politics Probe?](#)

Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: *The DPK leadership race 2026.*
Illustration: ChatGPT, 28th July 2026, edited.

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