

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's Religion Probe Ends - 32 Indictments

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32 indicted in religion-politics probe. Illustration: ChatGPT



Intensely persecuted, even by government representatives:
Shincheonji Church of Jesus



Intensely persecuted, even by government representatives:
[Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)

32 indicted at end of South Korean religion-politics probe: Religious leaders charged but not governing Democratic Party politicians

A major South Korean investigation into alleged political interference and financial misconduct by the Shincheonji Church of Jesus and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), commonly referred to in South Korea as [Unificationism](#) (통일교), formally ended on 31st August 2026. The prosecution - police Joint Investigation Headquarters (합동수사본부, "Joint Investigation HQ"), headed by Kim Tae-hoon (김태훈), Chief Prosecutor of the Daejeon High Prosecutors' Office, announced that it had indicted 32 people, including Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] leader Lee Man-hee (이만희) and [Family Federation](#) leader [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자). Four of those indicted were placed under arrest.

The [Law Times](#) (법률신문) adds that the 32 defendants were divided evenly between the two organizations: 16 were affiliated with Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] and 16 with the [Family Federation](#). All four arrested defendants were Shincheonji figures, including Lee Man-hee (이만희) and former General Secretary Go Dong-an (고동안). The remaining 12 Shincheonji-related defendants and all 16 [Family Federation](#)-related defendants were indicted without detention.

The investigation, which lasted approximately eight months, was launched in January and was described by the media as an

investigation into alleged "religion - politics collusion" (정교유착). It examined whether religious organizations had sought to influence political parties and elections through organized membership

drives, illegal political donations, or relationships with politicians. It also investigated allegations of embezzlement, tax evasion and other financial irregularities within the two religious organizations.

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SINCE 1950

법률신문

Law Times

South Korea's premier and oldest specialized legal media outlet

[Law Times](#) (법률신문) provides additional political context for the creation of the Joint Investigation HQ. According to the newspaper, the investigation was launched in January after discussions about establishing a special prosecutor had failed to make progress, with President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) ordering the creation of the Joint Investigation HQ. The investigation

therefore operated as a combined prosecution - police operation rather than as a separate special-prosecutor investigation.



Joint Investigation Headquarters. Illustration: ChatGPT

A large number of South Korean media outlets reported on the prosecutors' allegations on 31st August. The articles largely agreed on the overall outcome, but emphasized somewhat different aspects of the investigation.

The [Chosun Ilbo](#) provides the most detailed account of the allegations against Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] and the [Family Federation](#).

Regarding Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below], the [newspaper](#) reports that investigators concluded that tens of thousands of followers were organized into the conservative People Power Party (PPP) between June 2021 and April 2024 in an attempt to influence internal party elections and political outcomes. The alleged campaign covered four major electoral or party contests: the 2022 presidential election, the 2022 local elections, the 2023 PPP leadership election and the 2024 parliamentary elections.

朝鮮日報

Chosun Ilbo

South Korea's largest and most influential daily newspaper

According to [Chosun Ilbo](#), investigators believe Lee Man-hee used Shincheonji's highly hierarchical organizational structure to allocate membership targets among its 12 regional "tribes", with some followers allegedly pressured to join the PPP against their wishes.

The [Law Times](#) provides a useful legal clarification here: it says Lee Man-hee and Go Dong-an were indicted for allegedly forcing followers to join the People Power Party, an action prosecutors characterize as a violation of the Political Parties Act (정당법). The [law newspaper](#) thus makes clear that the prosecution's case concerns not simply unusually high levels of religious membership in a political party, but alleged organized and coercive party recruitment by senior Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] leaders.

The investigation also uncovered a separate allegation involving about 30 Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] followers who allegedly joined the Democratic Party to support a prospective candidate in the Goyang mayoral primary. However, [Chosun Ilbo](#) stresses that investigators found no evidence that Shincheonji's central leadership or Lee Man-hee had organized or ordered this particular operation.

경향신문

Kyunghyang Shinmun

a large and influential South Korean national daily, ranked among the top ten in terms of circulation

This distinction is important. The major PPP case was attributed to the Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] leadership, whereas the Democratic Party episode was not. [Kyunghyang Shinmun](#) (경향신문) likewise indicates that the Joint Investigation HQ concluded that there was no evidence of central-level coercion in the latter case.

The [Chosun Ilbo](#) additionally reports allegations that former Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] General Secretary Go Dong-an (고동안) diverted approximately 6 billion won (about US\$4,4 million) in church funds and that Shincheonji evaded approximately 7.57 billion won (about US\$5,5 million) in taxes by operating snack shops at 70 local churches under members' personal names and concealing cash sales through double bookkeeping.

[Law Times](#) adds an important detail about the alleged 6 billion-won (about US\$4.4 million) embezzlement. It reports that Go Dong-an allegedly collected money from followers by telling them that it was needed for legal expenses, and then diverted approximately 6 billion won for himself. This provides a more concrete description of what prosecutors mean by the alleged embezzlement.

On the [Family Federation](#), [Chosun Ilbo](#) focuses particularly on the allegation that [Hak Ja Han](#) - also called [Mother Han](#) - diverted approximately 10.5 billion won (about US\$7.5 million) of [Family Federation](#) funds between 2017 and 2025 and kept the money in a private safe. Investigators allegedly found that some expenditures had been disguised as overseas missionary support or other accounting entries, while cash donations were allegedly omitted from official accounts.

The [newspaper](#) says investigators concluded that some of the money was used for alleged unlawful political funding, lobbying, gifts to associates and luxury personal purchases. A total of approximately 26 billion won (about US\$19 million) in cash found in private safes was seized.



[Munhwa Ilbo](#) presents the investigation in a somewhat more concise manner and highlights an important distinction: investigators said they had established evidence of organized party membership campaigns, illegal political donations and alleged embezzlement, but had failed to prove some of the allegations concerning politicians receiving money or valuables.

The [newspaper](#) reports that 16 [Family Federation](#)-related individuals were indicted, including [Mother Han](#), former chief of staff Jeong Won-ju (정원주), and former World Headquarters

Director-General Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호). Six of those cases were submitted for summary proceedings [See editor's note 2 below] rather than full trials.

[Munhwa Ilbo](#) likewise reports that investigators attributed approximately 10.5 billion won (about US\$7.5 million) in alleged misappropriated [Federation](#) funds to [Mother Han](#) and other [Family Federation](#) officials. It says the approximately 26 billion won (about US\$19 million) in cash discovered in her private safes was seized and is subject to measures intended to preserve assets for possible future confiscation.

The [article](#) also emphasizes what the investigation did not establish. In particular, allegations that current or former lawmakers actually received illegal payments or gifts were not sufficiently proven. The [newspaper](#) cites the case of a governing Democratic Party lawmaker, Jeon Jae-soo (전재수), as an example.

[Munhwa Ilbo](#) additionally looks beyond the religious organizations themselves. It notes that another special prosecutor, Lee Tae-han (이태한), investigating allegations surrounding the National Election Commission, is scheduled to begin his investigation on 7th September.



[MBC News](#) gives a shorter overview, describing the investigation as having concluded after nearly eight months. It highlights the four arrested Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] figures and 12 others indicted without detention.

For the [Family Federation](#), [MBC](#) reports that 16 people were indicted without detention, including [Mother Han](#). The [media outlet](#) specifically describes the allegation that approximately 3 billion won (about US\$2.2 million) was withdrawn under the

guise of overseas missionary support and hidden in private safes, forming part of the total 10.5 billion won (about US\$7.5 million) allegedly embezzled.

[MBC News](#) also emphasizes the unusual arrangements investigators reportedly discovered: a safe was allegedly installed discreetly in the leader's bedroom area and managed by a single employee without ordinary expenditure records.

Importantly, [MBC News](#) includes the [Family Federation](#)'s rebuttal. The [organization](#) rejects the characterization of the money as privately embezzled [Federation](#) funds. It says that the so-called "internal funds" (내실 자금) consisted of voluntary religious offerings made by members and affiliated organizations to [Mother Han](#) as an expression of religious devotion. According to the [Family Federation](#), the funds were not used privately, but were spent for public purposes such as missionary activities.

The [Law Times](#) report helps sharpen several points that are less explicit in the other three articles. Most

importantly, it establishes that the 32 indictments were evenly divided between the two organizations: 16 Shincheonji-related defendants and 16 [Family Federation](#)-related defendants, with all four arrests occurring on the Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] side.



The [Law Times](#) also gives more precise descriptions of some of the alleged crimes. Lee Man-hee and Go Dong-an are accused of organized coercion of Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] followers into the conservative People Power Party, allegedly violating the Political Parties Act. Go Dong-an is additionally accused of collecting approximately 6 billion won from followers under the stated purpose of paying legal expenses and then embezzling the money.

For the [Family Federation](#), [Law Times](#) confirms the allegation that Yoon Yeong-ho and others illegally provided approximately 189 million won (ca. \$137,000 US dollars) in organizational funds to 132 politicians between 2019 and 2025. It also makes clear that [Hak Ja Han](#) and Jeong Won-ju were not prosecuted for this political-funding allegation, because investigators considered evidence of their direct involvement insufficient. They were, however, indicted over the separate allegation that approximately 10.5 billion won (about US\$7.5 million) in [Federation](#) funds had been diverted through false accounting and concealed in [Mother Han](#)'s private safe.

Thus, while the media outlets mentioned above report the end of the Joint Investigation HQ and the indictment of 32 people, their combined reporting reveals an important distinction. The investigation produced substantial cases involving alleged criminal conduct by officials of the two religious organizations, including organized political-party recruitment, alleged illegal political donations, tax evasion and alleged embezzlement. But it did not result in the indictment of any politician alleged to have received money or gifts. [MBC](#) likewise reports that no politician was ultimately indicted.

The central legal questions will therefore now move from the investigation stage to the courts: whether the alleged activities constituted criminal political interference and financial misconduct, and, in the [Family Federation](#) case in particular, whether the funds described by investigators as misappropriated property of the [religious organization](#) were in fact unlawfully diverted for private or political purposes, as prosecutors allege, or constituted religious offerings used for public or missionary purposes, as the [Family Federation](#) maintains.

[Editor's note 1: 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.]

[Editor's note 2: In South Korea, summary proceedings (known in Korean as Yaksik Jaepan - 약식재판) are simplified, expedited judicial processes designed to resolve minor offenses without a full, formal courtroom trial.]

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Family Federation challenges Mother Han verdict raising human rights concerns over treatment of octogenarian religious leader of frail health



Logo from the webpage of the Europe and the Middle East region of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.



Dr. Michael Balcomb, President of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in Europe and the Middle East](#), here in the rain outside Seoul Central District Court after the verdict had been issued on 31st August 2026. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Indictments

Throughout the proceedings [Dr. Han](#) has maintained her innocence. Her defence has consistently challenged the claim that she personally authorised, directed or knowingly participated in the unlawful actions alleged by the prosecution. Because important questions of evidence, individual responsibility and legal interpretation remain unresolved, her legal team will file an immediate appeal.

We are also deeply concerned by the humanitarian consequences of her prolonged detention and subsequent suspension of detention for hospitalization. An elderly religious leader was held for many months under conditions that [seriously affected her health](#), including [repeated falls](#) and the eventual need for [shoulder surgery](#), before any final determination of guilt. Whatever one's view of the legal case, the treatment of a person of advanced age and frail health before judgment raises serious questions, under the Constitution of the [Republic of Korea](#), concerning the principle of proportionality, human dignity and the protection of fundamental rights.

[Today's ruling](#) is not the end of the judicial process. We trust that the appellate court will carefully, fairly and independently examine the full evidentiary record, the question of [Dr. Han's](#) personal responsibility, and the legal issues raised by the defence.

We ask our members and friends throughout the world to respond peacefully and with dignity, to remain steadfast in prayer, and to continue the work to which [Dr. Han](#) has dedicated her life: reconciliation, strong families, service to humanity and peace.

Dr. Michael Balcomb, President of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in Europe and the Middle East](#)

A statement 31st August 2026 by the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in Europe and the Middle East](#)

The [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) expresses deep regret over today's ruling of the Seoul Central District Court concerning Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#).

Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#), who was [sentenced](#) to a total of 2 years imprisonment for political collusion, is 83 years old. For more than six decades she has devoted her life to reconciliation, interfaith cooperation, humanitarian service and the pursuit of peace – most notably through sustained efforts toward peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula. She is widely known internationally as the *Mother of Peace*.

See also [Mother Han Sentenced to 2 Years in First Trial](#)

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Mother of Peace:
Here, the front cover page of [Hak Ja Han's](#) memoirs *Mother of Peace* (2020)

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Featured image above: Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#), aka. Mother Han, being wheeled into the courtroom by her grandson Moon Shin-chul at Seoul Central District Court 31st August 2026. Photo: Dr. Michael Balcomb

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