

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Special Prosecutor demands crueler sentence for Holy Mother Han

Knut Holdhus
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Special prosecutor appeal for a harsher sentence. Illustration: ChatGPT



Aggressive lawfare, pursuing harsher sentence and end of hospital treatment for [Mother Han](#): Min Joong-gi, the head of an army of special prosecutors with extensive investigative powers. Image: Grok xAI

 **YONHAP NEWS AGENCY**

Yonhap News, South Korea's designated public news agency and the country's largest wire service

Special prosecutor appeal in case against Mother Han tests the limits of investigative powers granted by current Lee Jae-myung administration

The legal battle surrounding [Hak Ja Han](#) ([한학자](#)), leader of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - often referred to in South Korean media as [Unificationism](#) ([통일교](#)) - entered a new phase on 4th September, when the Kim Keon-hee ([김건희](#)) Special Prosecutor's Team led by Min Joong-gi ([민중기](#)) formally appealed the Seoul Central District Court's [first-instance judgment](#). The court had sentenced [Hak Ja Han](#) ([한학자](#)) - also called [Mother Han](#) - to a total of [two years in prison](#) on 31st August in a case concerning alleged political dealings between the [religious organization](#) and figures associated with the former Yoon Suk-yeol ([윤석열](#)) administration.

A large number of South Korean media outlets reported on 4th September on the appeal.

Special Prosecutor: the sentence was too lenient

[Yonhap News](#) gives the most detailed account of the Special Prosecutor's legal objections and reports that they appealed on two principal grounds: "unfair sentencing" and "misinterpretation of the law concerning the scope of the investigation". The prosecution argues that the [two-year sentence](#)

does not adequately reflect the seriousness of the case.

One of its main objections concerns the first-instance court's consideration of the activities of [Mother Han](#) in promoting world peace as a mitigating circumstance. According to [Yonhap](#), the Special Prosecutor's Team characterized this as a "vague and abstract" reason that should not have been given significant weight in sentencing.

The prosecution also objects to the court's assessment of the motive behind the alleged offenses. The court regarded the expansion of the [Family Federation](#)'s religious and political influence, rather than personal enrichment, as a favorable consideration. The Special Prosecutor's Team considers this reasoning inappropriate.



Maeil Ilbo a South Korean national comprehensive daily newspaper based in Seoul.



MBC News, the news division of the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), one of South Korea's four major nationwide television and radio networks.



Kookje Shinmun, a major Korean-language regional daily newspaper based in Busan, South Korea



Kukmin Ilbo, a major national comprehensive daily newspaper based in Seoul, South Korea, established in 1988, by David Yonggi Cho, the late pastor and founder of the Yoido Full Gospel Church - one of the largest megachurches in the world. This is an important distinction: the Special Prosecutors are arguing that the legality of initiating the investigation should be assessed on the basis of the information and circumstances available when the investigation began, rather than retrospectively on the basis of whether the suspected connection was ultimately proven



Newspim, a prominent South Korean economic and financial news agency and multimedia company based in Seoul

[Maeil Ilbo](#) highlights the same point in its headline, describing the [two-year sentence](#) as "light compared with the nature of the offense". It also draws attention to the prosecution's comparison with Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호), the former director-general of the [Family Federation](#)'s World Headquarters. Yoon had previously received a one-year-and-six-month sentence that was finalized by the Supreme Court and received a further six-month sentence in the present case. The prosecution argues that the resulting two years is the same as [Mother Han](#)'s sentence, despite its view that her position and responsibility in the alleged activities warranted a substantially heavier punishment.

Disagreement over which charges could legally be investigated

A second major element of the appeal concerns the scope of the Kim Keon-hee (김건희) Special Prosecutor Act, a piece of legislation passed by the South Korean parliament - where Lee Jae-myung (이재명) holds a super-majority - to establish "independent" directly state-appointed prosecutors to investigate corruption, bribery, and market manipulation involving the former First Lady, Kim Keon-hee (김건희). The act bypasses standard state prosecutors not trusted by the current Lee administration.

The first-instance court dismissed several charges without reaching a substantive judgment because it concluded that they fell outside the offenses that the Special Prosecutor was legally authorized to investigate. These included a charge alleging that [Mother Han](#) had instructed the destruction or concealment of evidence, as well as certain allegations concerning the "embezzlement" of funds allegedly connected with political financing involving politicians overseas.

The [Yonhap](#), [MBC News](#), [Kookje Shinmun](#), and [Maeil Ilbo](#) all report the Special Prosecutor's objection that the court's interpretation of the investigative mandate was legally incorrect. The prosecution describes the court's interpretation of the statutory language concerning evidence destruction as "clearly contrary to the wording of the law".

[Kukmin Ilbo](#), however, provides an additional argument from the Special Prosecutor's side concerning alleged embezzlement of funds from institutions affiliated with the [Family Federation](#). The prosecution maintains that it was legitimate to investigate these funds because they might have subsequently been provided to people on the Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) side, including Kim Keon-hee (김건희) and Kweon Seong-dong (권성동). According to the prosecution, the fact that investigators ultimately failed to establish such a connection does not mean

that the original investigation itself was unlawful.

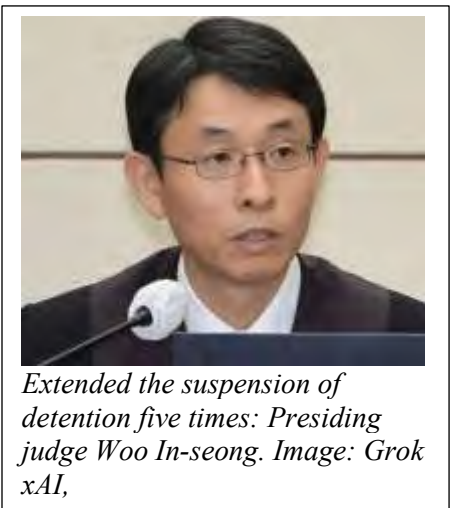
[Newspim](#) emphasizes the broader constitutional argument

[Newspim](#) gives the strongest emphasis to the Special Prosecutor's characterization of the case as much more than an ordinary corruption or political-funding case. It reports the prosecution's assertion that the case concerns a [religious organization](#) allegedly joining forces with political power to interfere in state affairs, thereby infringing constitutional principles including the separation of religion and state and representative democracy.

The Special Prosecutor's Team therefore argues that the social harm allegedly caused by the case, together with the seriousness of the offenses, makes the two-year sentence disproportionate to the defendants' alleged responsibility. This framing is significant because it presents the prosecution's appeal not merely as an attempt to increase an individual prison sentence, but as a challenge based on what it considers to be the broader constitutional and political significance of the case.

Appeal against continued suspension of detention

The Special Prosecutor has also appealed the court's decision to [extend the suspension of detention](#) for [Mother Han](#) (83) who suffers from several serious health issues.



he first-instance court, with Woo In-seong (우인성) as presiding judge, had [extended the suspension](#) on 1st September, the day after the [verdict](#), allowing her to remain outside detention until 6 p.m. on 30th September. The [decision](#) was reportedly based in part on her deteriorating health and medical circumstances.

[Newspim](#) notes that this was the fifth extension of the suspension of detention. The other reports likewise emphasize that the Special Prosecutor is challenging this decision separately from its appeal against the [sentence](#).

At present, [Mother Han](#)'s own legal team has not filed an appeal, according to [Yonhap](#), [MBC News](#), [Kookje Shinmun](#), and [Maeil Ilbo](#).

What the first-instance judgment actually decided

The 4th September reports also recall that [Mother Han](#) was convicted on several central charges. She received one year for violating the Political Funds Act and another one year for violating the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act and for occupational embezzlement, producing the combined two-year sentence.

At the same time, the court did not accept every allegation. Some occupational embezzlement charges resulted in acquittals, while the evidence-destruction and certain overseas political-funding-related embezzlement charges were dismissed because the court considered them outside the Special Prosecutor's statutory investigative jurisdiction.

Thus, the 4th September appeal is significant for two separate reasons: the Special Prosecutor is seeking a harsher sentence, but is also asking the appellate court to reconsider several fundamental legal rulings about which charges could properly be investigated and prosecuted.

The case therefore moves into the appeal stage with substantial disagreements remaining - not only over the appropriate punishment for [Mother Han](#), but also over the legal boundaries of the Special Prosecutor's investigation itself.

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The logo of the *Segye Ilbo*

Religious freedom and the danger of state intrusion

The most significant broader

issue raised by religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in his [column](#) in the South Korean daily *Segye Ilbo* on 31st August concerns **religious freedom and the relationship between religious organizations and state power.**

See also [Special Prosecutor Appeal for Harsher Sentence](#)



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): [Segye Ilbo](#)

He acknowledges an important principle: religious leaders are not above the law. If a religious leader commits a crime, that person should be held accountable.

But the opposite principle is equally important. The constitutional protection of **freedom of religion and separation of religion and state** does not merely mean that religious organizations must stay away from political power. It also means that **the state must respect the autonomous sphere of religious life and must not intrude into it arbitrarily.**



Do special prosecutors want to hold her responsible for unlawful actions carried out by subordinates simply because of her position as leader? [Mother Han](#), here being [released](#) for urgent medical treatment on 27th March 2026. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

This distinction is particularly relevant in a case involving the leader of a minority religious organization.

[Jeong](#) warns that if someone's position as the supreme leader of a religious organization is treated as sufficient evidence of criminal participation, then **religious hierarchy could begin to substitute for proof of individual criminal intent.**

That would establish a dangerous precedent. A leader could potentially be held criminally responsible for actions carried out by subordinates simply because of the leader's institutional

position or because the organization as a whole had engaged in controversial political or social activities.

For [Jeong](#), this is not merely a [Family Federation](#) issue. It potentially concerns **all religious communities.**

If concrete evidence of conspiracy, knowledge and intent is replaced by assumptions based on religious authority, organizational hierarchy or political controversy, no religious group can be confident that its constitutional autonomy is secure.

Ordinary believers should not become collateral damage

[Jeong](#) also makes an important distinction between the leadership of the [Family Federation](#) and its ordinary members.

The people who have suffered most from the controversy he argues

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the people who have suffered most from the controversy, he argues, are often ordinary believers who have **no connection whatsoever with political power**. They are people who contributed money to their religious community and maintained their faith over many years.

They should not automatically be stigmatized by descriptions of the **religious organization** as a “money-driven group” or as an example of “religion-politics collusion”.

His blunt conclusion is:

“The believers are not criminals.”

This point reinforces his broader argument that scrutiny of alleged wrongdoing by religious leaders must not become a justification for treating an entire religious community as inherently suspect.

The appeal must be independent of politics



*The building housing Seoul High Court, where **Mother Han's** appeal case will be tried, and where also Seoul Central District Court is located. AI-illustration: ChatGPT, 5th July 2026*

Ultimately, **Jeong** argues that the appeals court should resist the temptation to treat the **first-instance judgment** as a politically convenient compromise.

The two-year sentence might appear to occupy a middle ground: the special prosecutor obtained convictions, while the court rejected some charges and restricted the scope of the investigation. **Hak Ja Han's** side, meanwhile, can point to the dramatic reduction from 13 years to two as a reason to pursue an appeal.

But **criminal justice is not supposed to be a negotiated settlement between competing political interests**.

The appellate court should therefore neither protect the special prosecutor's reputation nor preserve the government's investigative achievements. Nor should it attempt to satisfy the expectations of the **Family Federation**.

Its task is narrower and more demanding: **to determine whether the evidence establishes beyond reasonable doubt that Mother Han personally knew about and approved the specific unlawful acts attributed to her**.

That is why **Jeong's** final image of the “**scales**” of the appellate court is so significant. What belongs on those scales, he says, is not public approval or hostility toward a minority religion, nor the political significance attached to the case.

It is simply **the weight of the evidence and the weight of individual responsibility**.

And behind that legal question lies an even larger constitutional one: **how can a democratic state punish genuine criminal conduct within a religious organization without allowing the investigation and prosecution of that conduct to become an intrusion into religious freedom itself?**

For [Jeong](#), ensuring that this boundary is respected may be one of the most important tasks facing the appellate court.

Continued from part 1 [Responsibility Must Be Proven in Appeal Court](#)

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Featured image above: Scales of freedom and constitutional boundary. Illustration: ChatGPT, 4th September 2026

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