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America's leading Asian allies pummel freedom of religion

A church dies in Japan, as religious leaders jailed in Korea



The logo of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, is seen at its building's entrance on Nov. 7, 2023, in Tokyo. (AP Photo/Shuji Kajiyama)

By Andrew Salmon - The Washington Times – Friday, July 10, 2026

SEOUL, South Korea — Japan and South Korea are both prosperous, successful democracies and core American allies — but both Asian powerhouses have cracked down on religious freedom in recent months.

Japan's Supreme Court recently nixed an appeal by the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, which was challenging the government's March 2025 order to dissolve the religion after a finding that the church coerced believers into donating.

Dissolution is now legally irreversible, though the federation in Japan, formerly the Unification Church, has not been found guilty of breaking any law.

“Religious liberty is critical to the functioning of a free society,” said former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. “This is a sad day for religious freedom in Japan, a country whose record as a champion of freedom in Asia will, I fear, be damaged by this decision.”

Similar storms are brewing in South Korea, where President Lee Jae-myung’s liberal administration has targeted several church leaders with various charges and a bill is pending in the national assembly that would grant Seoul the right to dissolve churches.

On June 24, Lee Man-hee, 95, founder of Shincheonji, a conservative Christian-based religion, was arrested on charges of coercing followers into political activities. Late last year, Busan Segeyro Church Pastor Son Hyung-bo was imprisoned for months on charges of election law violations after leading rallies against Mr. Lee’s candidacy.

The spiritual head of the federation in South Korea, Han Hak-ja, 83, is hospitalized after being held since September following detention on charges of attempting to bribe the former first lady with gifts of two Chanel bags, a Graff diamond necklace and ginseng extract tea. She has denied the allegations but faces a return to jail if she recovers from health issues that include a heart condition, glaucoma and trauma from falls.

Prosecutors on Friday demanded a 13-year sentence for Mrs. Han.

The cases have triggered a public debate on where the firewall between religion and politics should lie. The Shincheonji case also sparked global attention: Conservative U.S. influencer Charlie Kirk had met Rev. Son just days before being assassinated by a shooter in Utah.

In Japan, the federation’s woes escalated after the 2022 murder of former Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe by Tetsuya Yamagami, who said he was infuriated by his mother’s donations to the church when he was growing up. Abe was targeted as politicians in his party had been supported by the federation, which, it says, promotes conservative family values and the peaceful downfall of communism.

During Yamagami’s sentencing, the Japanese court essentially dismissed the killer’s motive, saying, “there is no substantial room to give weight to the motive for and circumstances leading to the offenses.”

Aside from religious activities, the federation’s organization in the United States operates a range of businesses, including The Washington Times.

High-profile Americans have excoriated the decision in Japan, and U.S. officials have visited Korea to probe legal attacks on religious figures.

“Free societies, at their core, must maintain religious freedom: It is the human right of the soul,” said former U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas.

Mr. Brownback, former ambassador-at-large for the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Office, said the forced dissolution of a legitimate church by the government undermines a “cornerstone right.”

Tokyo’s precedent is being watched in Seoul.

“It’s very dangerous because South Korea is looking at Japan and trying to pass a new law for dissolution of religious organizations,” said Patricia Duval, a lawyer who specializes in international human rights law.

Tokyo bulldozes a church

Members of the federation in Japan were accused of coercing followers into making donations and buying overpriced religious trinkets. The federation says donations were voluntary, some were returned and “spiritual sales” — the marketing of religious artifacts at prices critics say far exceed their value — ended decades ago.

Norishige Kondo, who formerly headed the FFWPU Japan’s legal department, recently told reporters at the Brussels Press Club that no laws were broken — case legalities were civil torts, not criminal charges — but the Supreme Court decision renders dissolution irreversible.

“Imagine for a moment your own place of worship, and imagine [government liquidators] arriving 15 minutes after the ruling, ordering you to leave immediately,” said Rev. Kimihiro Okamitsu, former pastor of Shinjuku Family Church.

At the time, he pleaded with liquidators to allow a scheduled funeral to take place. They said the funeral could proceed — but the condition imposed was “deeply humiliating.” Rev. Okamitsu was not allowed to conduct services as a pastor.

“The deceased had attended the church for 25 years,” the reverend said. “Why could that person not have a final farewell in the church he had loved?”

Some 300 federation churches across Japan are in liquidation, demolishing a religious community raised since 1959.

Since its founding in 1987, an organization of Japanese attorneys known as the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales has pursued the Unification Church over the sales.

Attorney Hiroshi Yamaguchi, who helped found the network, had a history with the federation’s churches that predated the network’s founding: He represented the Socialist Party in a defamation suit brought by the International Federation for Victory Over Communism, a case

the party lost in 1994. The network went on to file thousands of compensation claims against the church over four decades but did not formally petition for its dissolution until October 2022, months after Abe's assassination.

Mr. Kondo said 60% of the claims made by the network are from former followers who have been psychologically "deprogrammed."

Ax looms over Korean churches

A "Partial Amendment to the Civic Act" was filed by Cho Hyuk-jin, a liberal, independent lawmaker, in Seoul on Jan. 9. It has gained a nickname in Korean media that describes its contents: "The Church Dissolution Act."

Its background is the downfall of the conservative Yoon Suk Yeol administration, which imploded after Mr. Yoon declared martial law in December 2024. Backlash was immediate: Martial law was overturned, and the ensuing uproar fueled Mr. Lee's bid for the presidency.

After Mr. Lee's administration took office in June 2025, multiple probes were aimed at those alleged to have engaged in corrupt relationships with the prior administration.

There is also a broader background. Conservative preachers in some Protestant churches have a tradition of rallying against liberal administrations.

Mr. Lee of Shincheonji is accused of ordering believers to join Mr. Yoon's People Power Party, or PPP, to gain political influence.

Mrs. Han, the widow of church founder Sun Myung Moon, is accused of bribing former first lady Kim Keon-hee, now serving an 11-year term for corruption in return for political favors.

The federation insists the bribery was the work of a rogue executive acting independently.

South Korea's proposed legislation, if passed, would grant the government the right to dissolve religious groups, seize their assets and otherwise control religious activities.

Mr. Lee reportedly agreed, in a meeting with mainstream religious leaders in January, that it would be desirable if both the federation and Shincheonji were dismantled.

But South Korea's constitution throws up barriers.

Article 19 states, "All citizens shall enjoy freedom of conscience." Article 20 reads "All citizens shall enjoy freedom of religion" and "Religion and state shall be separated." Article 21 states, "All citizens shall enjoy freedom of speech ... and freedom of assembly and association."

Opponents of the legislation are sounding the alarm in South Korea and appealing for help worldwide.

“The PPP maintains that freedom of religion is a fundamental right guaranteed by the constitution and states that it will make every effort to prevent the passage of the ‘Church Dissolution Act,’” the conservative party said in a written response to The Washington Times.

“Like any democratic country around the world, Korea acknowledges freedom of religion for all citizens,” party leader Jang Dong-hyeok told foreign reporters. “But with the Lee Jae-myung government, this important value has been significantly infringed.”

However, if Mr. Lee’s ruling party gets a bit in its teeth, the PPP’s ability to oppose the legislation could crumble. Not only did it lose the presidency after Mr. Yoon’s epic blunder, but it also earlier lost the National Assembly – the DPK’s control of the house was a major frustration behind the martial law declaration — and most recently, lost June local elections.

Washington is watching

Early this month, a U.S. delegation including 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 Liaison Belsis Romero and embassy officials visited Busan Segeyro Church and met Rev. Son.

Their findings are expected to be featured in reports later this year.

Rev. Son’s son, Chance, said the bill’s momentum has been “effectively stalled,” but it remains before the Assembly’s Legislation and Judicial Committee.

If it is revived, “We are ready to respond promptly and biblically,” Mr. Son warned.

But he prays for assistance.

“At this point, we have no information about what specific positions the U.S. government may adopt or what action, if any, it may take,” he said. “We continue to pray and hope that the U.S., as an ally that values religious liberty, will stand firmly for freedom of faith in Korea.”

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