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South Korea's anti-faith fandango

Lee vexes Trump with 'vicious' church raids



South Korea's anti-faith fandango. Illustration by Alex Hunter of The Washington Times

By Randy Evans – Wednesday, August 26, 2026

OPINION:

On Monday, the next step in a never-ending march against religious freedom will be imposed on Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, co-founder and worldwide leader of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

It is yet another milestone in South Korean President Lee Jae-myung's systematic persecution of his perceived political opponents within the country's religious communities.

Mr. Lee's quest for retribution against his supposed political adversaries did not begin with Dr. Han or her church and, as history shows, will not end with her conviction. It extends well beyond Dr. Han and her church, encompassing every religion and faith that Mr. Lee believes threatens his hold on political power.

Mr. Lee's actions eliminate any reasonable doubt about his willingness to use the full powers of government to quell political opposition, especially among churches or believers, regardless of faith.

The chronology of events confirms his purpose.

As the world now knows, his government started in July 2025 with “investigators” and raids of many churches in South Korea, including the Family Federation, as well as ongoing investigations of the Segyero Church (Presbyterian) in Busan.

The episode became internationally visible when President Trump publicly referred to reports of “vicious raids on churches” immediately before his Aug. 25, 2025, meeting with Mr. Lee.

Notwithstanding Mr. Trump’s concerns, the Lee government detained Pastor Son Hyun-bo in September. Pastor Son is not affiliated with Dr. Han or her church. He was the senior pastor of Segyero Church and a prominent conservative Christian activist.

Unsurprisingly, given Mr. Lee’s preoccupation with quelling any challenge by the religious community, Pastor Son was charged with election law violations. His prosecution would become the template for the Lee government’s persecution of other religious institutions and leaders for alleged violations involving political advocacy intertwined with church activities.

Pastor Son ultimately spent five months in detention before receiving a suspended sentence.

The Lee scheme faced scrutiny when Turning Point USA’s Charlie Kirk traveled to South Korea in September 2025. Kirk was a featured speaker at a two-day conference called “Build Up Korea 2025.”

Kirk spoke about Christianity, communism, freedom, conservative politics and what he viewed as political repression of faith in South Korea.

Indeed, Kirk communicated his concerns to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who recounted them to the world at the memorial after Kirk’s tragic assassination: “I’m in South Korea. I have many concerns I want to share with Secretary Rubio when I get back.”

Mr. Lee has remained impervious to exposure of his actions against people and churches of faith whom he perceived as threats. In September 2025, Lee prosecutors detained Dr. Han, the then-82-year-old leader of the Family Federation, on allegations involving bribery, political funds and other election-related accusations.

The Family Federation, formerly known as the Unification Church, has also founded and operated businesses, including The Washington Times.

From July to December 2025, South Korean authorities conducted at least four search-and-seizure operations against Dr. Han’s church, residence and affiliated institutions.

Reports indicate that more than 1,000 officers and investigators participated in a July 2025 operation lasting roughly 15 hours.

Unchallenged, by late 2025, the Lee government shifted its focus from allegations against faith figures to religious institutions. Mr. Lee went even further as part of his campaign to rid South

Korea of any religious opposition when he asked government officials to examine foreign systems, including Japan's, for dealing with religious corporations.

In January, Mr. Lee's policies increasingly focused not merely on prosecutions but also on proposals to justify the dissolution of religious organizations for what he considered "unlawful political involvement."

Unsurprisingly, judges convicted Pastor Son in January. The court imposed a six-month sentence, suspended for one year.

Next, the Lee government began investigating allegations of systematic political party enrollment involving members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Founder Lee Man-hee, now 95, was arrested in June. The government alleged that tens of thousands of believers mobilized to influence party politics.

In the meantime, Mr. Lee's agenda has been exposed. Last month, Pastor Son took the issue directly to Washington, meeting with Mr. Trump at the White House and raising concerns over religious freedom and proposed dissolution legislation. The Lee government changed nothing.

With Dr. Han's verdict to be announced Monday, the Lee government continues its efforts to enact legislation that would allow not just detention, prosecution and conviction of church leaders such as Pastor Son and Dr. Han, but also, ultimately, the elimination of any religious group or individual Mr. Lee deems a threat to his political power.

Charlie Kirk was right.

There is little question that South Korea has moved from legitimate enforcement of criminal law into selective enforcement against politically disfavored religious organizations.

Against this backdrop, no one should be surprised at Dr. Han's verdict and any resulting sentence. It is but another step in a steady march by a government intent on quelling religious dissent, regardless of the consequences.

For Dr. Han and her church, the consequences will likely remain very real. Nevertheless, religious intolerance enforced to preserve political power never destroys faith; it only strengthens it. That has always been true, and it will be so now.

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