

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Korea's Troubling Precedent of Selective Probes

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Imbalanced justice in South Korea. Illustration: Chat GPT



The logo of the Chosun Ilbo

Uneven justice? South Korea's church-politics probes raise questions of a disturbing pattern of lack of prosecutorial balance

The latest developments surrounding South Korea's investigations into alleged church-politics collusion have reignited a familiar and sensitive debate: whether the country's law-enforcement institutions apply the same standards of urgency and rigor to all political actors, regardless of party affiliation.

At the center of this controversy is an apparent asymmetry. Allegations involving members of the ruling Democratic Party (DPK) appear to be languishing with little tangible progress, while probes touching the main opposition People Power Party (PPP) are advancing rapidly and aggressively. For many observers, this contrast raises uncomfortable questions about prosecutorial discretion, political influence, and institutional credibility.



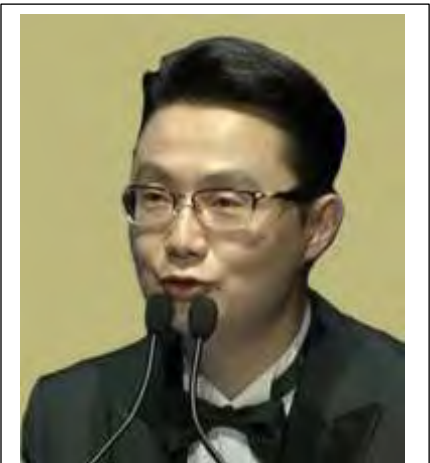
Jeon Jae-soo (2023)

The large daily newspaper Chosun Ilbo published on 26th January a report headlined "[Police Probe Into 'Unification Church Case' Stalls ... Jeon Jae-soo Prepares to Run for Busan Mayor](#)". The article highlights the above-mentioned concern through the case of Democratic Party lawmaker Jeon Jae-soo (전재수).

Police have been investigating allegations that Jeon received tens of millions of won in cash and valuables from figures associated with the [Family Federation](#) - formerly the Unification Church - allegedly in exchange for political favors, between 2018 and 2020. Despite the seriousness of the accusations - and despite the fact that the statute of limitations for certain offenses is close to expiring - the investigation has shown little substantive movement nearly two months after it formally began. This inertia stands in stark contrast to the speed and intensity of parallel investigations involving the PPP.

The Jeon Jae-soo case resurfaced after a delayed disclosure that a special prosecutor team, originally tasked with examining alleged lobbying by the [Family Federation](#) toward the PPP, had uncovered testimony implicating not only opposition figures but also lawmakers affiliated with the Democratic Party.

According to testimony given in August of last year by Yoon Yeong-ho, a former senior official of the [Family Federation](#), large sums of money and valuables were allegedly delivered to Jeon, former Democratic Party lawmaker Lim Jong-seong (임종성), and former Future United Party lawmaker Kim Gyu-hwan (김규환). Yet despite this testimony, no investigative action was taken for more than four months.



Yoon Yeong-ho, here 9th August 2020



Former Democratic Party lawmaker Lim Jong-seon (2019)

The special prosecutor later argued that allegations involving Democratic Party figures fell outside the statutory scope of the special counsel's mandate and were therefore transferred to the police. While this explanation may be procedurally defensible, critics note that the practical consequence was a significant delay - one that now risks rendering the case moot if statutes of limitation expire. Jeon resigned from his ministerial post and was questioned once as a suspect in December, but since then, investigators have reportedly confined themselves largely to digital forensic analysis, without further interrogations or summonses of other implicated figures.

This lack of urgency becomes particularly striking when viewed alongside Jeon's political behavior. Far from retreating from public life, he has begun openly preparing a bid for mayor of Busan, South Korea's second-largest city. He has publicly discussed his expected declaration date, flooded the city with campaign banners, and scheduled appearances at high-profile political events. Within Korean political culture, such actions are often interpreted as a signal that a politician believes legal risks are either manageable or already neutralized. For critics, this reinforces the perception that the investigation has lost momentum at a crucial moment.

By contrast, prosecutors' handling of allegations involving the Shincheonji Church [See editor's note below] and the People Power Party has been markedly different. In that case, prosecutors have moved swiftly to secure testimony suggesting that tens of thousands of Shincheonji members were mobilized to join the PPP en masse between 2021 and 2023. Former regional leaders of the church have reportedly provided detailed accounts, enrollment targets, and even lists of individual party members. Prosecutors are now preparing compulsory measures, including large-scale search-and-seizure operations, to expand the probe.

To a Western audience, this disparity may appear puzzling, but it is rooted in several features of South Korea's political and

institutional landscape. First, the country has a long history of politicized prosecution. For decades, prosecutors were widely seen as aligned with conservative governments; in recent years, progressive administrations have sought to rebalance that power, sometimes resulting in perceptions - fair or not - that prosecutorial zeal now disproportionately targets conservatives. Each shift in political power tends to be accompanied by accusations that law enforcement has become an instrument of partisan accountability rather than neutral justice.



The Shincheonji Peace Palace in Cheongpyeong-myeon, on the same lake where the [Family Federation](#) has large facilities, in Gapyeong, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea (2020)

Second, South Korea's legal system grants prosecutors and police significant discretion in pacing investigations, prioritizing cases, and determining when to deploy coercive measures. While such discretion exists in most democracies, it becomes controversial in highly polarized environments where timing can shape electoral outcomes. An investigation that accelerates before an election can be politically devastating; one that stalls until statutes of limitation expire can be politically absolving.

Third, religious organizations like the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji [See editor's note below] occupy a uniquely sensitive position in

Korean society. They are often viewed with suspicion by the media, and allegations of political collusion tend to provoke strong public reactions. When investigations appear selective - aggressive in one direction, cautious in another - it reinforces suspicions that legal standards are being applied unevenly

depending on which political faction stands to benefit.

From this perspective, the issue is not merely whether Jeon Jae-soo is guilty or whether the PPP benefited improperly from Shincheonji's [See editor's note below] actions. Rather, it is whether South Korea's justice system can convincingly demonstrate that similar allegations trigger similar investigative responses, regardless of who holds power. For a democracy that prides itself on hard-won institutional reforms and public accountability, the appearance of differential treatment risks eroding trust not only in prosecutors and police, but in the political system as a whole.

In that sense, the [Chosun Ilbo article](#) is less about one stalled investigation than about a broader pattern that many Koreans - and increasingly foreign observers - find troubling: when justice moves quickly in one direction and hesitates in another, explanations grounded solely in procedure may no longer suffice.

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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.]

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sentenced
Tetsuya
Yamagami (山上
徹也), who was
charged with
murder and
other crimes, to
life
imprisonment, as sought by prosecutors.



Positional relationship between **former prime minister Shinzo Abe and the shooter Tetsuya Yamagami** on his assassination. Sourced from [Nikkei.com](#). Photo: [Asanagi / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: [CC CC0 1.0 UPDD](#)

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The central point of contention was how much weight should be given in sentencing to the defendant's disadvantaged upbringing, which stemmed from his mother's involvement in the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). The court's conclusion that his upbringing "cannot be said to have had a significant impact on the occurrence of the incident" is an appropriate judgment.

No Significant Impact of Upbringing Recognized



Shinzo Abe in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated. Photo: [United States Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel / Wikimedia Commons](#). [Public domain image](#). Cropped

At the same time, the defendant's act – attacking Shinzo Abe with a homemade firearm during a campaign speech in support of a House of Councillors election – shook the very foundations of democracy. By killing Abe, whom the defendant himself described as "not the real target", he sought to shock society, provoke criticism of the [religious organization](#), and "strike back" at it. This act can be described as nothing other than terrorism. While the ruling did judge the crime as a heinous murder, it cannot be said to have fully confronted its essential nature as a terrorist act.

During the trial, the defense called the defendant's family members and scholars of religion as witnesses, arguing that the mother's conversion to the former [Unification Church](#) and her large financial donations constituted "religious abuse" of her children, and sought leniency in sentencing.

Regarding the defendant's upbringing, the court acknowledged that it had "significant disadvantaged aspects", stating,

"It is not impossible to understand that the defendant, having been deeply shaken by his brother's suicide, saw the complex emotions he harbored toward the [religious organization](#) turn into intense anger."

However, the court continued,

"There must be said to have been a major leap between that and the decision to commit murder and to plan and carry out the manufacture of a homemade firearm."

Therefore, the court concluded,

"The influence of his upbringing cannot be recognized as substantial."

As for the decision to change the target from senior [church](#) officials to Shinzo Abe, the court found,

"Ultimately, the defendant decided to carry out the attack by prioritizing his own circumstances – namely, his worsening financial situation and his belief that he could not wait any longer."

It further stated that even this "shortsighted and self-centered decision-making process cannot be regarded as having been significantly influenced by the disadvantages of his upbringing."



The scene of the assassination of Shinzo Abe in front of Yamato-Saidaiji Station in Nara City, Japan. Photo: [\(撮影\) 一般社団法人板垣退助先生顕彰会 \(アップロード\) / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

From the outset, the incident was investigated and prosecuted as a lone-wolf crime by Yamagami. During the trial, the defense did not dispute the facts, and the defendant himself admitted them. Nevertheless, various doubts remain regarding the theory that he acted entirely alone. There is a major discrepancy between the assessment by Dr. Hidetada Fukushima (福島英賢) of Nara Medical University Hospital, who treated Shinzo Abe and reported severe damage to the heart, and the findings of the subsequent judicial autopsy conducted by the Nara Prefectural Police. There is also information suggesting that the fatal bullet was never recovered.

See also ["Organized Terrorism, Not Lone Wolf, Killed Abe"](#)

See also [Lone-Wolf Theory Disputed in Abe Assassination](#)

These are not so-called "conspiracy theories," but reasonable questions. It was hoped that they would be clarified during the trial. However, only the forensic pathologist

testified, and Dr. Fukushima was not called as a witness. Rather than dispelling doubts, the proceedings can be said to have deepened them.

Target Changed Five Days Before the Incident

The defendant had originally gone so far as to incur debt in order to manufacture a homemade firearm to attack senior figures of the [religious organization](#). The decision to change the target to Abe – whom he had originally regarded as “not an enemy” – and to begin acting on that decision was made just five days before the crime.

Here, too, there was a major “leap”. Was economic hardship alone truly the reason for that leap? It cannot be assumed that the defendant has told the whole truth. Clarifying the background behind this leap is essential.

See also [Court Rejects Media Narrative in Yamagami Case](#)

See also [Upbringing No Excuse as Abe Assassin Gets Life](#)

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Featured image above: Tetsuya Yamagami given life sentence. Illustration: Chat GPT 25th January 2026.

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