

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: China-Led Alliance is Religious Freedom Threat

Knut Holdhus
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Former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback (center) testifies at a U.S. House hearing, February 4, 2026, Washington DC



U.S. hearing highlights freedom threat and China's role in driving global religious repression as the totalitarian state is accused of leading "dark alliance"

Tokyo, 5th February 2026 - Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

Concerns Raised Over Religious Pressure in Japan and South Korea

Testimony by Former U.S. Officials on Detention of Hak Ja Han and Others at U.S. House Hearing

China's "Dark Alliance" Poses a Threat

by Yuya Kawase (川瀬 裕也)

Washington DC (Yuya Kawase) - On 4th February, the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing focused on religious freedom around the world. Testimony included not only criticism of the Chinese government for its continued religious repression, but also expressions of concern about pressure being placed on specific religious organizations by the governments of Japan and South Korea.

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*Used against believers:
Advanced Chinese face
recognition technology.
Illustration: Chat GPT*



*Stephen Frederick Schneck,
American author, political
philosopher, and Chair of
United States Commission on
International Religious
Freedom (USCIRF) 2024-2025*

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At the hearing, former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback testified and addressed the situation in East Asia. He pointed out that a "dark alliance" of communist and authoritarian states that regard religious freedom as a threat is taking shape, asserting,

"China exists behind it as the mastermind."

He went on to explain that China has invested tens of billions of dollars to build the world's most advanced surveillance technology and is thoroughly suppressing all forms of belief, including Uyghurs, Tibetans, Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners. He warned that China's provision of such surveillance technology to other authoritarian states constitutes an "unprecedented threat".

Brownback also referred to the current detention of [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), president of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), stating,

"In South Korea, leaders of Christian groups and the [Family Federation](#) who have drawn the attention of the government are being detained one after another."

He further noted that "Japan faces similar challenges," expressing concern about how both the Japanese and South Korean governments are dealing with religious organizations.

The hearing was also attended by Grace Drexel, the daughter of Christian pastor Ezra Jin, who is currently imprisoned in China. Speaking from the perspective of a family member directly affected, she warned of the dangers of the international community remaining silent in the face of religious persecution and called on the U.S. government to maintain sustained attention and action.

In addition, Stephen F. Schneck, former chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) [See editor's note below], a U.S. government advisory body, also gave testimony.

On the same day, a kickoff breakfast meeting was held at the U.S. Capitol to discuss the same theme, where members of both chambers of Congress and scholars of religion called for strengthening international efforts to defend religious freedom.

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[Editor's note: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government advisory body established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Its purpose is to monitor, analyze, and report on violations of freedom of religion or belief worldwide and to advise the U.S. government on policy responses.

USCIRF does not make or enforce law. Instead, it provides policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. One of its most influential roles is issuing an annual report that assesses religious freedom conditions in countries around the world. In this report, USCIRF recommends which governments should be designated as "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs) or placed on a Special Watch List for severe or systematic violations, such as imprisonment for religious belief, forced conversions, or repression of minority faiths.

The Commission consists of nine members: three appointed by the President, three by the Speaker of the House, and three by the Senate leadership. Commissioners come from both major political parties, reinforcing USCIRF's nonpartisan mandate.

USCIRF conducts fact-finding missions, holds public hearings, engages with civil society and religious leaders, and produces thematic reports on issues such as blasphemy laws, authoritarian surveillance, and persecution of religious minorities. Its work aims to integrate religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy as a core human rights concern.]

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The issue is raised 4th February by religious affairs reporter Jeon Seong-su in his religion column in the daily newspaper Segye Ilbo. The headline was **"Controversy Over President Hak Ja Han's Worsening Health – Now an Explanation Is Needed"**

세계일보

The logo of the Segye
Ilbo

Jeong writes that according to reporting 4th February by Kukmin Ilbo, a Korean daily based on Christian values, [Mother Han](#) – now well into her 80s – has been detained at the Seoul Detention Center for more than four months while undergoing trial.

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suggests that during her detention she has experienced multiple falls within a short period, is legally blind, and suffers from several underlying medical conditions. Her legal team has cited these circumstances in a renewed request for bail, though the court has not yet issued a final ruling.



These revelations did not emerge suddenly. For weeks, concerns about Mother Han's physical condition had circulated quietly on social media and among legal observers. Reports of repeated falls during transfers to court hearings, difficulty standing or walking, and occasional absences from court due to

health issues gradually accumulated. While such accounts were initially regarded as unconfirmed or speculative, their persistence created unease among the public – especially as they involved an elderly detainee whose trial was already well underway.

What changed the nature of the discussion was the involvement of mainstream journalism. **When established media outlets like Dong-a Ilbo, MBC, JTBC News reported specific dates, circumstances, and medical context based on investigative reporting, the issue moved decisively from rumor to public accountability.** At that point, the question ceased to be whether the claims were inconvenient or politically sensitive. Instead, it became whether society had received sufficient explanation about how the judicial system is balancing legal procedure against health risks and human dignity.

According to Jeong's report, from a medical perspective, the reported symptoms are not trivial. Repeated falls in elderly individuals are widely recognized as a serious warning sign, often indicating declining physical resilience and increased vulnerability to complications. Injuries involving the pelvis or lower body can significantly impair mobility and independence, while preexisting cardiovascular conditions – such as atrial fibrillation – can turn physical stress into a potentially life-threatening situation. For defendants in such condition, the physical demands of detention and frequent court appearances may carry risks far beyond inconvenience.

This raises a difficult but unavoidable question: is continued detention the most reasonable option in such circumstances? The law permits detention when there is concern about flight risk or destruction of evidence, and courts are obligated to weigh these factors carefully. No serious observer disputes that the judiciary must apply these standards impartially. However, impartiality does not require ignoring context. **When a defendant is elderly, medically fragile, and already deep into the trial process, the absence of clear public explanation can itself undermine confidence in the system.**

Importantly, this discussion is not about granting special treatment to a powerful figure. International human-rights norms make clear that special consideration for vulnerable individuals is not privilege, but responsibility. **The United Nations' "Nelson Mandela Rules", which outline minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners, recommend that detention of elderly or seriously ill individuals be used only as a last resort.** Where incarceration poses serious risk to life or dignity, authorities are urged to actively consider alternative measures. These principles are widely accepted among democratic and developed nations, including South Korea.



The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners

(the Nelson Mandela Rules)

From the front page of the UN document "Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners", also called the Nelson Mandela Rules.

At the heart of the matter lies a deeper misunderstanding about equality before the law. Equality does not mean treating every individual identically, regardless of circumstance. Rather, substantive equality requires reasonable accommodation for differing conditions so that justice does not become mechanically cruel. **Applying the same measures to a healthy adult and a medically fragile octogenarian may satisfy formal rules while violating the spirit of fairness those rules are meant to serve.**

The Segye Ilbo article points out that the international dimension of this case adds further weight. **Hak Ja Han** (한학자) is not only a domestic figure but a religious leader known well beyond Korea's borders. How her health and human rights are handled during trial will inevitably shape international perceptions of the Korean judiciary's treatment of elderly and vulnerable defendants. This is not a threat or pressure on the courts, but a reality of global scrutiny in an interconnected world.

Transparency, in this context, is not a concession – it is a safeguard. Clear explanations of how medical assessments are conducted, how detention decisions are justified, and what safeguards are in place to protect health and dignity help preserve judicial authority rather than weaken it. Silence, by contrast, allows speculation to flourish and trust to erode.



Justice, after all, is not something that exists only at the moment a verdict is handed down. It is also judged by how a legal system behaves during the process itself – how it treats those

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Imbalanced scale of justice. Photo: 99Joseph / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#)

during the process itself – how it treats those who are weak, dependent, or nearing the limits of physical endurance. **If an elderly defendant were to suffer irreversible harm during trial due to inadequate consideration of health risks, the damage would not be confined to one individual or one case. It would mark a failure of the system's moral credibility, regardless of the final legal outcome.**

It is possible that concerns about [Hak Ja Han's](#) health are exaggerated, incomplete, or ultimately unfounded. If so, clear disclosure and explanation would quickly put those fears to rest.

But if the concerns are real, then requesting explanation and appropriate measures is neither excessive nor political – it is a legitimate civic demand. The strength of the rule of law is revealed not in how firmly it restrains the powerful, but in how carefully it protects the vulnerable.

At minimum, a society committed to human dignity must ensure that its legal processes do not place life itself at unnecessary risk. Upholding that standard is not an obstacle to justice. It is what gives justice its meaning.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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