

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Breaking deal, S Korea ups Young ho Yoon's jail time

Knut Holdhus
April 27, 2026



[Yoon Yeong-ho](#) on May 8, 2020



Seoul appeals court lengthens sentence in high-profile political influence case amid claims of retaliation against anyone believed to have supported sentenced president

On 27th April 2026, the liberal South Korean daily Hankyoreh carried a [news article](#) penned by Kim Su-yeon (김수연) about

[Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호), a former high-ranking [Family Federation](#) leader, receiving a heavier sentence in the appellate court.

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*Min Joong-gi, the head of an army of special prosecutors with extensive investigative powers.
Image: Grok xAI*

The court delivered a significant ruling in what it terms a high-profile "political corruption case" involving [Yoon](#) and figures connected to the country's 2022 presidential election. The case centers on the former senior official of the religious movement in Korea often called [Unificationism](#) (통일교) - formally known as the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). He was accused of attempting to influence political outcomes and gain government favor through unlawful financial activities and luxury gifts.

In the second trial (appeal), the Criminal Division 6-1 of Seoul High Court, with Kim Jong-woo (김종우) as Presiding Judge, increased [Yoon](#)'s prison sentence to one year and six months. This marked a longer sentence than the one year and two months he received in the [initial trial](#). The reason for the increase was that the appellate court found [Yoon](#) guilty of an additional charge - occupational embezzlement - which had not been fully recognized in the [first ruling](#).

According to the [Hankyoreh article](#), the court concluded that [Yoon](#) had engaged in multiple forms of unlawful conduct. These included violations of South Korea's Political Funds Act and the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act (often referred to as the Anti-Graft Act). Specifically, he was sentenced to six months in prison for illegally providing political funds, and an additional year for bribery-related offenses

and embezzlement tied to his use of [Unificationism](#) resources.



The [Yonhap News Agency](#) reported the same day that the legal team of special prosecutor Min Joong-gi had demanded that [Yoon](#) be sentenced to four years behind bars. Critics view the harshness of the request by the special prosecutors appointed by the current left-leaning administration as part of its revenge on the former administration and its supporters. Former president Yoon Suk-yeol was on February 19, this year sentenced to life imprisonment.



He was given life sentence, she 20 months in what some perceive as revenge on political opponents: Former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and First Lady Kim Keon-hee, here in Tokyo 16th March 2023.



Kweon Seong-dong January 2025

At the heart of the case is the allegation that the [Family Federation](#) sought to expand its political influence during South Korea's 20th presidential election in March 2022. According to the court, the leadership of the [religious organization](#) viewed the election as a strategic opportunity. It allegedly supported a candidate who would be favorable to its interests, offering organizational backing and resources in return for future policy support and influence once that candidate took power.

The court described this as a deliberate and organized effort, led from the top levels of the [religious organization](#). The broader goal, the appeals court claimed, was to secure government support for projects linked to [Unificationism](#) and to strengthen its long-term political influence in South Korea. Even if these efforts did not ultimately succeed, the court emphasized that the attempt itself was serious enough to damage public trust.

A key part of the case involved expensive gifts given to Kim Keon-hee (김건희), the wife of ousted conservative president Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열). [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (not related to the former president) was found to have arranged the delivery of luxury items - including a Chanel handbag worth approximately 12.7 million won (around \$9,000 USD) and a Graff necklace worth over 62 million won (around \$45,000 USD). These items were reportedly delivered through an intermediary, identified as a shaman figure, with the intention of gaining favorable treatment for the [religious organization](#).

In addition, [Yoon](#) was convicted of unlawfully providing 100 million won (roughly \$70,000 USD) in political funds to Kweon Seong-dong (권성동), a lawmaker from the ruling People Power Party, in January 2022, shortly before the presidential election. This payment was allegedly linked to a request for support for a [Unificationism](#)-related event, further reinforcing the prosecution's argument that [Yoon](#) was attempting to use money and influence to shape political outcomes.

One of the most important differences between the [first](#) and second trials concerned the charge of occupational embezzlement. In the [original ruling](#), the court had acquitted [Yoon](#) of part of this charge. The reasoning was that, at the time one of the gifts was delivered, Kim Keon-hee (김건희) was not yet officially the spouse of a sitting public official, but rather the spouse of a president-elect. Because of this technicality, the Anti-Graft Act was considered not to apply.

However, the appellate court rejected this reasoning. It argued that the timing of the gift - whether before or after the presidential inauguration - did not meaningfully change the nature of the act. Using funds from a [religious organization](#) to

give gifts intended to influence a future president, the court said, is inherently problematic regardless of formal titles.

The judges further stated that it would be unreasonable for criminal responsibility to hinge on such timing details. Even if certain legal provisions did not strictly apply in a narrow sense, the broader legal and ethical implications remained serious. From the perspective of maintaining a fair and trustworthy legal system, such conduct could not be accepted.

At the same time, the court did acknowledge some mitigating factors. [Yoon](#) had cooperated with investigators and had testified in related cases, helping authorities better understand the broader network of activities. This cooperation was taken into account when determining his final sentence.

Not all charges were upheld, however. The court maintained an earlier decision to dismiss allegations that [Yoon](#) had been involved in destroying evidence related to separate suspicions about overseas gambling by

a senior [Unificationism](#) leader. It ruled that those matters fell outside the scope of the special prosecutor's investigation. The court also rejected claims from [Yoon](#)'s defense that certain evidence had been obtained illegally, as well as arguments from both sides that the sentencing was unfair.



Using the control of all branches of government to take South Korea in an authoritarian direction? Lee Jae-myung, President of South Korea since June 4, 2025

Overall, the ruling underscores South Korea's strict stance on political corruption, especially when it involves powerful organizations perceived to have supported the former conservative administration and made attempts to influence elections and government policy. It's worth noting, however, that in a related case involving a leading politician from the current leftwing administration, the case was closed for "lack of prosecutable evidence".

Even among the supporters of current President Lee Jae-myung (이재명), there are those who are afraid that his revenge on the former administration, and anyone suspected of supporting it, has gone too far. The governing coalition controls the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, at the same time that Lee has a steel grip on his own party. But if you wield power like a sword to cut down your opponents, it will inevitably be stained with blood - and may, in time, turn back and wound you.

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The Return Of Labeling Faith As Manipulation

April 26, 2026 • Knut Holdhus

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From heresy to “mind control”: How Tokyo Court in dissolution case brought back historical labeling of minority faiths as using

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sophisticated manipulative techniques

Dr. Massimo Introvigne, renowned Italian scholar of sociology of religion, describes in an [opinion piece](#) in [Bitter Winter](#) on 27th March 2026 what he perceives as the reasoning of the judges in Tokyo High Court in their [decision](#) of 4th March to uphold the dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). To a large extent, Introvigne claims, the honorable justices have assumed that the [religious organization](#) in an incredible way have developed “mental manipulation as the main tool” through which to spread its message.

In his [analysis](#), Introvigne identifies a central conceptual pillar underpinning the [court ruling](#): the notion that members of so-called “cults” are subject to forms of psychological manipulation that undermine or even eliminate their free will. While the court avoids explicitly invoking the term “brainwashing”, its reasoning closely mirrors that controversial and widely discredited idea. The judgment repeatedly asserts that adherents of the [Family Federation](#) are subjected to techniques that impair their autonomy, rendering them unable to make sound judgments or to disengage from the movement’s teachings. According to the court, these methods are so powerful that they effectively suppress individual agency.

This framing raises immediate concerns, not only because of its implications for the case at hand but also because of its reliance on a theoretical model that has long been rejected in both academic and legal contexts. The suggestion that religious believers can be systematically stripped of their capacity for independent decision-making through specialized psychological techniques has a deep historical lineage. Across centuries, similar accusations have been directed at minority or unfamiliar religious groups. When observers encounter beliefs or practices that appear strange, demanding, or socially disruptive, there has often been a tendency to assume that followers must have been deceived, coerced, or otherwise manipulated into their commitments.

Dr. Introvigne points out that this pattern is not new. In antiquity, **critics of early Christianity claimed that converts were victims of sorcery or magical influence**. Comparable accusations surfaced in imperial China, where unauthorized religious movements were frequently described as employing black magic to ensnare adherents. During the medieval period in Europe, groups labeled as heretical were similarly portrayed as manipulating followers through hidden or sinister means. In each instance, the underlying logic was consistent: **rather than acknowledging that individuals might freely choose unconventional or unpopular beliefs, critics attributed conversion to external forces that overrode rational judgment**.



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Wood engraving depicting the tarring and feathering of Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the founder of Mormonism and the Latter-Day Saint movement. On 24th March 1832, he was dragged from his bedroom in the middle of the night. His attackers strangled him, tore off his clothes, beat him, and attempted to force him to ingest poison. They then tarred and feathered his body and left him for dead. (Wikipedia) Illustration in Harper's Magazine 1853, vol. 6. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

In the modern era, this narrative evolved rather than disappeared. By the nineteenth century, opponents of movements such as the Latter-day Saints argued that no reasonable person would voluntarily embrace such doctrines without being subjected to some form of “mesmeric” or hypnotic influence. The language shifted from magic to proto-scientific concepts, but the core assumption remained intact – that **deviation from mainstream belief required explanation through diminished agency**.



Visual artist Huang Guocai donned a self-made “washing machine helmet” to satirize the brainwashing function of national education in communist China. From a Hong Kong protest on 29th July 2012. Photo: Iris Tong / Voice of America. [Public domain](#) image.

In his [article](#), the Italian scholar describes how the twentieth century saw the emergence of the term “brainwashing”, particularly in the context of the Korean War. Western observers speculated that Communist regimes had developed sophisticated methods for coercively transforming the beliefs of prisoners of war. However, subsequent investigations revealed that many of these claims were exaggerated or unsupported by empirical evidence. **The term itself originated not within the scientific community but through journalistic and political channels**, and it gained traction more through public anxiety than through rigorous research.

Despite its shaky foundations, the concept of brainwashing was later adopted by segments of the anti-cult movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Faced with the rapid growth of new religious movements, some activists and concerned families sought explanations for why individuals – particularly young people – would join such groups. The theory of coercive persuasion offered a seemingly intuitive answer: members were not exercising genuine choice but were instead victims of psychological control. [\[See editor’s note below\]](#)

Yet when subjected to scrutiny in legal settings, these claims failed to hold up. A pivotal moment came with the 1990 “Fishman” case in the United States, where a federal

court evaluated the scientific validity of coercive persuasion theories. After examining expert testimony, the court concluded that such frameworks lacked sufficient empirical grounding to be admissible as evidence. **This marked a significant turning point, signaling judicial skepticism toward the use of “brainwashing” as a legal argument.**



Courtroom of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Photo (2014): Adrian Gryczuk / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Poland](#)

According to Introvigne, similar conclusions emerged in Europe. The *European Court of Human Rights* has explicitly noted the absence of a universally accepted scientific definition of “mind control”. Moreover, it has observed that many behaviors often cited as indicators of coercion – such as strong commitment, communal living, or active proselytizing – are common across a wide spectrum of religious traditions. Earlier still, the *Italian Constitutional Court* invalidated the crime of “plagio” (enslaving another person’s mind) in 1981, a statute from the Fascist era (1922-1943) reminiscent of brainwashing concepts, on the grounds that it was **incompatible with both scientific understanding and the principles of religious freedom**.

These legal developments reflect a broader consensus: claims of psychological manipulation in religious contexts are inherently problematic. They tend to be vague, difficult to define, and highly susceptible to subjective interpretation. More importantly, they **risk enabling authorities to substitute their own judgments for the lived experiences and self-understandings of believers**. When courts accept such theories, they create an uneven playing field in which **majority religions are presumed to operate through legitimate persuasion, while minority groups are viewed with suspicion**.

It is within this context that the *Tokyo High Court’s* reasoning becomes particularly contentious. By asserting that the [Family Federation](#) employs undefined forms of “psychological influence”, the court effectively revives a framework that has been widely discredited. It does so without clearly distinguishing between coercion and ordinary religious practices such as teaching, preaching, or encouraging commitment. The absence of a precise definition allows the concept to function as a catch-all explanation, rather than a rigorously demonstrated claim.

This ambiguity has significant implications. Religious traditions across the world encourage acts of devotion that may appear demanding to outsiders, including financial contributions, personal sacrifice, and adherence to doctrinal teachings. If such practices are reinterpreted as evidence of manipulation, it becomes exceedingly difficult to draw a coherent boundary between acceptable religious activity and unlawful influence. The issue then shifts from objective criteria to subjective approval: beliefs and practices deemed acceptable by the majority are legitimized, while those associated with

minority groups are pathologized.

At stake is a fundamental principle of religious liberty: the recognition that **individuals have the right to adopt beliefs and make commitments that others may find unusual, excessive, or even irrational. A legal system that questions the authenticity of such choices risks undermining personal autonomy rather than protecting it.** By suggesting that certain forms of religious adherence are incompatible with free will, **the court implicitly positions itself as an arbiter of which beliefs can be sincerely held.**

Introvigne's critique ultimately frames the [Tokyo High Court's decision](#) as a regression. By relying on the language and assumptions of psychological manipulation, the ruling departs from established academic and legal standards. **It opens the door to interpreting voluntary religious behavior as coerced and to justifying state intervention on the basis of contested and unverified theories.** The concern extends beyond the immediate case: if such reasoning is normalized, it could affect a wide range of religious communities, not only the [Family Federation](#).

In this light, the debate is not merely about one movement or one court decision. It touches on broader questions about how societies understand belief, autonomy, and the limits of state authority. The reappearance of “brainwashing”-type arguments in judicial reasoning suggests an unresolved tension between skepticism toward minority religions and commitment to the principles of freedom of belief. Whether this tension can be resolved without compromising fundamental rights remains an open and pressing question.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an Italian scholar specializing in the sociology of religion. He founded and serves as managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, an international network of academics focused on the study of new religious movements. He has authored around 70 books and over 100 scholarly articles in this field. here, speaking on 10th July 2025 in a session during the 8th annual conference of the European Academy of Religion (EuARe) at the University of Vienna. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

[Editor's note: In Japan, the **“mind-control” myth** has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or “brainwash” their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The “mind-control” myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive **“deprogramming”** of believers – sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan's preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the [Family Federation](#). A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived “mind-control” rhetoric to explain fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan’s restrictive religious climate. Overall, the “mind-control” myth functions less as a scientific or psychological concept and more as a moral panic – a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

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