

Religious freedom advocates condemn South Korean arrest of Family Federation head

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Hak Ja Han Moon, right, sprinkles the church's holy water onto newly-married couples in a mass wedding ceremony at the CheongShim Peace World Center in Gapyeong, South Korea, Sunday, Feb. 17, 2013. Some 3,500 South Korean and foreign couples exchanged or reaffirmed marriage vows in the Unification Church's mass wedding arranged by Hak Ja Han Moon, a wife of the late Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the controversial founder of the Unification Church

SEOUL, South Korea - South Korea's arrest of Hak Ja Han Moon has drawn condemnation from the conservative religious leader's supporters around the world and raised concerns that the Asian democracy's recently installed liberal president is overseeing a purge of his party's political opponents.

Mrs. Moon, 82, the matriarch of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification and widow of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, was arrested in the predawn hours Tuesday after hours of questioning that began Monday.

Mrs. Moon and the foundation she leads, formerly known as the Unification Church, have been caught up in an expanding investigation into South Korean figures linked to imprisoned former President Yoon Suk Yeol, who briefly hurled the nation into chaos with a swiftly overturned martial law declaration in December.

The Rev. Demian Dunkley, president of the U.S. branch of Mrs. Moon's federation, said South Korea has "crossed a line into chaos."

"This arrest is not just an attack on Holy Mother Han," he said in a statement. "It is an attack on freedom of religion itself. It is a warning shot to every church, mosque, temple, and synagogue in Korea - and beyond - that faith is not safe from the grasp of government overreach. If they can arrest the Mother of Peace, they can come for anyone."

Jang Dong-hyuk, the newly elected leader of the People Power Party, the conservative party once led by Mr. Yoon, has sharply criticized prosecutors' raids on churches across South Korea. In a Monday speech, he called the government of President Lee Jae-myung a "pro-China dictatorship."

Mr. Lee, who assumed the presidency in June, defended the church raids at a White House summit in August as "fact-finding" investigations into the previous administration. President Trump had questioned whether the lifelong liberal politician was conducting a political "purge."

Jan Figel, president of the nongovernmental organization Forum for Religious Freedom Europe, accused the South Korean government of taking political vengeance.

"South Korea is witnessing a sweeping crackdown on faith communities," Mr. Figel wrote in a Monday message.

He called Mrs. Moon's situation "uniquely severe."

"This is not anti-corruption," he wrote. "It is a purge."

Accusations, denials

The special counsel investigating Mr. Yoon's wife, Kim Keon-hee, asked the court to issue a custody warrant to prevent Mrs. Moon from destroying evidence. Mrs. Moon stands accused of embezzlement, suborning the destruction of evidence and violating the Political Funds Act and anti-graft law. She has denied the charges.

Investigators have seized data showing that federation members, exact numbers unknown, joined Mr. Yoon's conservative People Power Party to help empower lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong, a top supporter of Mr. Yoon. Investigators say the federation paid \$72,000 to Mr. Kweon as a bribe. Mr. Kweon was also jailed and denied all charges.

Investigators say the alleged bribes were intended to earn the federation political favors, including official assistance with a project in Cambodia, a takeover of Korean news channel YTN, and a seat at the presidential inauguration.

Neither deal transpired, and Mrs. Moon did not attend Mr. Yoon's inauguration.

Mrs. Moon, clad in black, arrived in a wheelchair Monday at Seoul Central District Court for questioning. She declined two earlier summonses, citing health issues connected to a heart procedure.

She claimed she had no interest in politics. She said she neither ordered nor permitted the alleged bribery, which was carried out by fired Family Federation Director General Yoon Young-ho, acting on his own initiative.

Mrs. Moon's detainment is the latest blow to her federation.

The Family Federation is facing imminent dissolution in Japan, where authorities claim it coerced followers into making massive financial donations.

Followers say they have broken no laws and that state accusations are outdated and, in some cases, falsified.

Ms. Moon's husband, the late Rev. Moon, founded the Unification Church in South Korea in 1954 and went on to make it a global movement. She inherited the organization's leadership after Rev. Moon died in 2012.

The foundation pursues the unification of religions worldwide while promoting conservative family values. It also operates several businesses, including The Washington Times.

Believers are stunned.

An elder of the federation present when the detention warrant was granted early Tuesday said those at the scene were "shocked, very sad. ... It was almost unbelievable, very troubling."

The elder was convinced that the court lacked "evidence that is tangible and material."

Mrs. Moon's followers were "not angry, but prayerful," he said.

"We have no fear of Mother Moon's courage and strength to get through this: The truth will come out," the elder said. "The biggest concern is that she is 82 and has a heart condition, and that is something to be careful about."

Politics vs. religion?

One observer who agrees that a firewall should separate church and state is suspicious of the allegations.

"Of course, governments have the right to investigate corruption ... [but] I have reasons to doubt the accusations," said Massimo Introvigne, a Catholic sociologist and author who campaigns for tolerance for new religions. "The amount of the alleged bribes and value of the gifts is disproportionately low for corrupting the president of a large country. We are talking \$60,000 to \$70,000, not millions."

South Korea, home to global brands such as Samsung and Hyundai, is a high-tech manufacturing hub, a pop culture powerhouse and the world's 13th largest economy by gross domestic product.

In the months between Mr. Yoon's December martial law attempt and the June election in which his liberal opponent, Mr. Lee, won South Korea's presidency, Seoul was roiled by demonstrations on the left and the right.

Churches were among the conservative groups defending Mr. Yoon.

"The wide scope of the crackdown on churches reveals a political motivation," Mr. Introvigne said.

"In other countries, churches are left a larger latitude to be active in politics," he said.

Meanwhile, Seoul is adding more heft to its investigations into the former president and first lady.

On Tuesday, the government approved three revised bills extending special counsel investigations by 30 days and adding manpower to the investigative teams.

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