

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's Probe into Faith, Funds, and Favors Fails

Knut Holdhus
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Featured image above: South Korean investigation. Illustration: Chat GPT



Hankyoreh Shim bun

A month after special probe into religious lobbying allegations began, South Korean daily examines the progress made

The liberal South Korean daily Hankyoreh published on 14th February an article headlined "[Joint Investigation Headquarters One Month In. How Much Has Been Revealed About the Unification Church's Bribery and Shincheonji's Organized Party Enrollment?](#)"



Being investigated:
the Shincheonji
Church of
Jesus



Being investigated:
the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)

The [piece](#) by reporter Kang Jae-gu (강재구) is all about South Korea's political landscape in early 2026 being shaken by a fast-moving investigation into alleged ties between powerful religious organizations and mainstream political actors. At the center of the controversy are two groups long familiar to the Korean public: [Unificationism](#) (통일교) - often called the [Unification Church](#) - and Shincheonji (신천지) [See editor's note below].

Directed by the left-leaning Lee administration, prosecutors and police have formed a joint investigation task force to determine whether these organizations - generally perceived to be conservative - engaged in improper financial dealings, political lobbying, or coordinated efforts to influence party politics. Although the investigation is still ongoing, the allegations already suggest potentially far-reaching consequences for politicians across party lines.

According to [the Hankyoreh](#), the joint investigation headquarters - launched on 6th January - was created specifically to examine suspicions of "religion-politics collusion". In South Korea, where religious groups can wield substantial social influence, the idea that organized religious bodies may have attempted to sway elections or curry favor with political elites has become a highly sensitive issue. Since its formation, the task force has carried out search and seizure operations and summoned numerous individuals for questioning. Investigators are attempting to reconstruct events in detail: who met whom, what money changed hands, and

whether any of these transactions violated criminal law.

The inquiry into what is now called the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - referred to

by its former name the [Unification Church](#) in the [article](#) - focuses primarily on alleged financial lobbying of politicians from both the ruling and opposition parties. In fact, suspicion of bribery was the original trigger for the creation of the joint investigation unit.



Yoon Yeong-ho, Dec. 5, 2021

The controversy intensified after it became known that [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호), a former senior official at the [Family Federation](#)'s world headquarters, reportedly told investigators that between 2018 and 2020 he delivered tens of millions of Korean won to several prominent political figures. These include Jeon Jae-soo (전재수), a lawmaker from the Democratic Party; Lim Jong-seong (임종성), a former Democratic Party legislator; and Kim Kyu-hwan (김규환), now head of the state-run Korea Coal Corporation and previously affiliated with the conservative United Future Party.

The [South Korean paper](#) writes that [Yoon](#) is also separately accused of giving luxury items - such as an expensive necklace and handbag - to former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), which further heightened public scrutiny.

According to the allegations, one lawmaker received 20 million won (ca. \$13,900) in cash and a luxury watch worth 10 million won (ca. \$6,950) around 2018. Two other politicians are suspected of having received 30 million won (ca. \$20,850) each around the time of the April 2020 parliamentary elections. Internal documents of the [religious organization](#) reportedly include references to meetings with these figures, appearing in materials prepared for reporting to the [Federation](#)'s leader, [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - known within the [organization](#) as "[True Mother](#)". The politicians named in the reports have firmly denied accepting any illegal funds.

A central legal challenge for prosecutors is South Korea's statute of limitations. For illegal political funding, the limitation period is seven years. If a payment occurred in 2018, prosecution for that specific offense may already be time-barred. Investigators may instead attempt to pursue bribery charges, but that requires proving a quid pro quo - that money was given in exchange for specific political favors.

Moreover, the applicable limitation period depends on the amount allegedly received. If the sum was under 30 million won (ca. \$20,850), the limit is seven years; if 30 million won or more but less than 100 million won (ca. \$69,500), the limit extends to ten years. As a result, investigators must not only establish that at least 30 million won was transferred, but also demonstrate a concrete exchange relationship between the payment and an official act.

The [Hankyoreh](#) mentions another aspect of the investigation into the [Family Federation](#), concerning so-called "split donations". This refers to a tactic in which a large sum of money is divided into smaller contributions, often distributed under multiple names, in order to circumvent legal caps on political donations.



Song Kwang-seok, April 26, 2024

Prosecutors have already indicted Song Kwang-seok (송광석), a former head of the Universal Peace Federation - an organization affiliated with the [Family Federation](#) - on charges of violating the Political Funds Act. He allegedly arranged donations totaling 13 million won (ca. \$9,000) to 11 politicians from both major parties in January 2019. Investigators suspect that senior leadership of the [religious organization](#) may have been aware of or coordinated these actions, and further inquiries are ongoing.

Parallel to the [Family Federation](#) case is a separate but related investigation into Shincheonji [See editor's note below], a new religious movement (NRM) that gained global attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2020, a major outbreak in the

city of Daegu was linked to a Shincheonji [See editor's note below] congregation, and the group faced intense criticism. At the time, Lee Jae-myung (이재명) - then governor of Gyeonggi Province and later the Democratic Party's presidential candidate - took a particularly hard line against the organization, pursuing aggressive legal and administrative measures.

The [Hankyoreh article](#) points out that investigators are now examining allegations that, beginning in mid-to-late 2021, Shincheonji [See editor's note below] systematically encouraged or organized its members to join the conservative People Power Party. The timing is politically significant. As Lee Jae-myung

(이재명) emerged as the likely Democratic presidential nominee for the 2022 election, some former Shincheonji [See editor's note below] officials claim the organization sought to align itself with the opposing party as a survival strategy. By building influence within the People Power Party's membership base, they allegedly hoped to gain political leverage and cultivate a more favorable environment.



Aggressively promoting special counsel investigations: Lee Jae-myung, President of South Korea since June 4, 2025



Former President Yoon Suk-yeol of the Republic of Korea April 25, 2023, in Maryland, USA



Lee Man-hee, founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth)

At that time, Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) - formerly South Korea's Prosecutor General - was competing in the People Power Party's presidential primary. During his tenure as Prosecutor General, he had reportedly rejected police requests for search warrants targeting Shincheonji [See editor's note below] on two occasions. According to statements from former insiders, Shincheonji leaders believed that helping Yoon secure the party's nomination might foster a friendlier relationship. Recordings of internal phone calls among Shincheonji [See editor's note below] executives allegedly mention the names of senior party lawmakers in this context.

Based on these suspicions, the joint investigation headquarters recently carried out search and seizure operations on allegations that Shincheonji [See editor's note below] may have coerced members into joining a political party against their free will, potentially violating the Political Parties Act. Authorities are also investigating whether the group interfered with the internal management of the party's presidential primary process - an act that could constitute obstruction of business under Korean law.

According to the [Hankyoreh](#), the scope of the Shincheonji [See editor's note below] probe may extend further. Former officials have suggested that when the group's leader, Lee Man-hee (이만희), was arrested and prosecuted for alleged violations of infectious disease control laws during the pandemic, funds were collected from regional branches for possible lobbying efforts aimed at political and legal institutions. A recorded phone call, made public in the media, captures Lee suggesting meetings with members of the National Assembly and officials at the presidential office (then known as the Blue House) to resolve the group's legal troubles. Shincheonji [See editor's note below], for its part, strongly denies any coercion of party membership or illegal lobbying.

These investigations raise broader questions about transparency, political finance, and the influence of organized religious movements in South Korean democracy. Both the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji [See editor's note below] deny wrongdoing, and no final judicial conclusions have yet been reached. Nevertheless, the inquiry has already generated significant political tension. Depending on the evidence uncovered - and whether prosecutors can overcome legal hurdles such as statutes of limitations - the case could have lasting ramifications for politicians, religious leaders, and public trust in the separation of religion and state in South Korea.

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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Japan: "MEXT Fabrication" Storm Grows Online

- February 14, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



Did the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) fabricate evidence? Social media demands answers as doubts deepen over court filings



Tokyo, 13th February 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. *Original article*.

"MEXT Fabrication" Trends – Suspicion Over Written Statements Reignites on Social Media

Logo of the *Sekai Nippo*

by editorial staff of the *Sekai Nippo*

Suspicion toward the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has resurfaced, primarily on social media, with the term "MEXT fabrication" (文科省捏造) trending on X (formerly Twitter). This comes amid allegations that the ministry, which petitioned for a dissolution order against the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly known as the *Unification Church*), has fabricated written statements. And those were submitted as evidence of

速報・ニュース・3,359件のポスト

文科省陳述書捏造疑惑、高裁判決目前にXで再燃

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*Allegations that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) fabricated written statements trend on X (formerly Twitter). Screenshot used by *Sekai Nippo* 13th Feb. 2026*

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legal violations constituting grounds for dissolution of the religious organization.

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MEXT has submitted written statements from 261 former believers to the court. However, in an [article dated 21st January of last year, this newspaper](#) reported that "there have been multiple cases in which the submitted written statements were not written by the individuals who were allegedly harmed, and those individuals claim that the contents are false."

Subsequent reporting uncovered additional cases, including instances in which testimony from a former believer of a separate organization unrelated to the [Family Federation](#) was included in the written statements. There were also testimonies of "signatures with no recollection", in which individuals stated they had no memory of signing the statements, yet their signatures appeared in their own handwriting.

On X, comments poured in such as "This is plainly a major problem," "They are trying to force the dissolution through," and "A fabrication by the state". Some users also called on MEXT to fulfill its responsibility to provide an explanation. As of 7:00 PM on 13th February, the newspaper's article posted on X on 21st January last year had been viewed more than 760,000 times.



Masumi Fukuda, here 20th Jan. 2024. Photo: Screenshot

Nonfiction writer Masumi Fukuda (福田ますみ), who has been covering the dissolution order against the [religious organization](#), referred in her book *Sacrificed by the State* (Asuka Shinsho) to witness examinations held at the Tokyo District Court in December 2024. She pointed out that a former believer who had submitted a written statement "was unable to answer at all about the contents written in the statement," and "testified that matters were written that he did not remember."

Regarding the allegations of fabricated written statements, in March last year Satoshi Hamada (浜田聡), then a member of the House of Councillors from the NHK Party, [raised questions](#) during a session of the House of Councillors' Committee on Internal Affairs and Communications. Mariko Kobayashi (小林万里子), Director-General for Policy Planning at the Agency for Cultural Affairs, stated that she was "aware of the contents" and did not deny the allegation of fabrication.

Meanwhile, criticism has been raised from the international community that the Japanese government's stance infringes upon freedom of religion.



Former House of Councillors member for the NHK Party Satoshi Hamada (浜田聡), here speaking on 26th January 2025. Photo: Yasuhiro Uno (宇野泰弘)



Sam Brownback, US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom 2018–2021. Here, at the IRF Summit in Washington DC 5th Feb. 2025. Photo: FOREF

On 4th February, during a hearing of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback [expressed concern](#) regarding the Japanese government's response.

See also [Japan: Lawyers Accused of Wilful Dehumanization](#)

Featured image above: Allegations of MEXT fabricating evidence. Illustration: Chat GPT, 14th February 2026, edited

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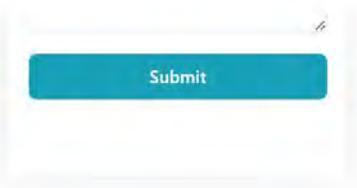
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