

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: S Korean Indictment Unfair - Religious Language

Knut Holdhus
February 25, 2026



Infographic summary of 13th trial of Mother Han on February 25, 2026

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New hearing in case against Mother Han: Defense argues prejudice in courtroom battle over religious language, funds, and health of detained defendant

OhmyNews (오마이뉴스), a South Korean online newspaper widely known for pioneering a citizen journalism model, [reported](#) 25th February on the 13th trial of [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - also called [Mother Han](#) - the leader of [Unificationism](#) (통일교), a religious movement [founded](#) in the 1950s. The hearing took place at Seoul Central District Court and centered not only on allegations of unlawful political activities, but also on a deeper dispute about religion, public perception, and the boundaries of what a criminal court should consider.

		
Hak Ja Han , Mother Han	Yoon Yeong-ho August 9, 2020	Jeong Won-ju January 19, 2025

To understand the significance of the day's exchanges, some background may be necessary. Since the death of [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명), her husband, in 2012, she has led the organization, now named the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), which operates globally and maintains religious, educational, and peace-building networks. According to the [OhmyNews article](#), in South Korea the [Federation](#) has frequently been criticized by mainstream Protestant groups as a "heresy", a label that

carries strong social stigma.

[Mother Han](#) is currently on trial along with two former senior [Federation](#) officials: [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호), a former World Headquarters director, and [Jeong Won-ju](#) (정원주), her former chief of staff. Special prosecutors appointed by the current left-leaning Lee administration have charged the three with violations of the Political Funds Act and the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, among other offenses. At issue are allegations that [Federation](#) funds or networks were used to channel money or gifts to politicians and politically connected figures.



Reporter Lee Jin-min (이진민) writes for [OhmyNews](#) that the 25th February hearing revealed two parallel strategies from [Mother Han](#)'s legal team. The first involved a procedural dispute about terminology and religious prejudice. The second involved shifting responsibility onto [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호) for allegedly improper political contacts.

During the afternoon session, [Hak Ja Han](#)'s lawyers objected to the way a specific term used by the [religious organization](#) - "national restoration" - appears in the indictment and in earlier testimony. In the internal language of [Unificationism](#), this phrase carries theological meaning tied to the [movement](#)'s vision of moral and spiritual renewal. The defense argued that the term's meaning has not been clearly defined in the legal documents and may be misunderstood by the court or by the public.

According to [Mother Han](#)'s lawyers, misunderstanding such terminology could unfairly shape perceptions of intent. They claimed that widespread media portrayals of the [Family Federation](#) as a heretical or fringe sect might bias judgments about guilt. To address this, they asked the court to call a

professor - described as a doctrinal expert - to testify about the [movement](#)'s theology and clarify the meaning of "national restoration".

However, the presiding judge, Woo In-seong (우인성), firmly rejected the request. He stated that the courtroom is not a venue for doctrinal lectures. In his view, the purpose of the trial is to determine whether specific laws were violated, not to evaluate whether [Unificationism](#) is orthodox, heterodox, or socially stigmatized. If the defense wished to clarify terminology, he suggested, they could submit written materials instead of calling a live expert witness.



People Power Party lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong Dec. 23, 2024

[Mother Han](#)'s legal team pushed back. They argued that former director [Yoon](#) had interpreted her intentions through the lens of [Unificationist](#) doctrine, and that the disputed term connected to subsequent actions - such as an alleged 100 million won (approximately 70,000 U.S. dollars) payment to conservative lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동) and donations to regional branches of the People Power Party. Because theology allegedly informed [Yoon](#)'s understanding of [Mother Han](#)'s direction, they said, doctrinal explanation was directly relevant.

[OhmyNews](#) points out that Judge Woo again declined. He suggested that if the defense wished to clarify [Mother Han](#)'s intentions, it would be more appropriate to question her directly rather than rely on a third-party interpretation of doctrine. He emphasized that the court is not examining whether [Unificationism](#) is heretical; it is examining alleged criminal conduct. After further insistence from the defense, the judge reaffirmed his refusal.

This exchange highlights a key tension in the case. [Mother Han](#)'s side appears concerned that broader social hostility toward the [Family Federation](#) could color the court's interpretation of evidence. The judge, by contrast, is attempting to keep the proceedings narrowly focused on statutory violations rather than theological debates.

The second major theme of the hearing was the defense's continued effort to assign primary responsibility to [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호). [Mother Han](#)'s team has consistently argued that if improper political

contacts occurred, they were driven by [Yoon's](#) personal ambition rather than by instructions from [Mother Han](#).

To support this narrative, the defense pointed to events after [Yoon's](#) dismissal from the [Family Federation](#). They noted that in 2024, a youth organization called the GPD Foundation - established by [Yoon](#) after his removal - held an event that received congratulatory remarks from lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동). The implication was that [Yoon](#) independently cultivated political ties for his own purposes.



Former First Lady of the Republic of Korea Kim Keon-hee

[Hak Ja Han's](#) lawyers argued that during [Yoon's](#) tenure there were several controversial actions: the alleged payment of 100 million won (ca. 70,000 US dollars) to Kweon, the provision of a luxury gift to Kim Keon-hee (김건희 - a prominent public figure and spouse of a former president), the use of split donations to avoid reporting thresholds, contacts with politicians via an intermediary, and promotion of a Cambodian development project known as the MPP initiative. They asked rhetorically whether the [Family Federation](#) continued these projects after [Yoon's](#) expulsion. According to them, it did not - suggesting that the initiatives were tied to [Yoon](#) personally.

Furthermore, the defense maintained that matters reported to [Mother Han](#) were limited to religious ceremonies and internal faith activities. They asserted that there is no evidence she gave prior instructions or approval for political activities. [Jeong Won-ju's](#) legal team echoed this argument, also criticizing [Yoon](#) in connection with lawmaker Kweon's participation in the foundation event.

Another striking moment in the hearing involved a witness: [Yoon's](#) sister-in-law, identified only by her surname Lee. She is believed to have purchased a Chanel handbag that prosecutors allege was later given to Kim Keon-hee's side. Defense attorneys questioned her about whether she bought the bag at the request of [Yoon's](#) wife, who had served as a [Federation](#) finance director, and whether she had been instructed to avoid encountering [Hak Ja Han](#) at the department store. Lee did not respond to the questions, remaining silent throughout.



Layout of [Mother Han's](#) detention cell, compared to size of a Mini Cooper

According to the [OhmyNews article](#), finally, [Mother Han's](#) health and detention status were briefly raised. Her legal team stated that after [returning to the detention center](#) on 21st February, she suffered a nosebleed the following day. They submitted an additional written opinion in support of a bail request originally filed in November. As of the hearing date 25th February, no decision on bail had been announced.

Prosecutors from the special counsel team investigating matters related to Kim Keon-hee (김건희) attended the hearing, along with a large group of defense attorneys representing [Mother Han](#).

The 25th February session at Seoul Central District Court did not resolve the core legal questions but clarified the

strategic lines of the case. [Mother Han's](#) defense is attempting to frame the controversy as partly shaped by misunderstanding and prejudice against her [religious movement](#), while also isolating alleged political misconduct to a [subordinate official](#). The court, meanwhile, has signaled that it intends to confine the trial

to concrete legal evidence rather than broader debates about theology or reputation. The next hearing is scheduled for 6th March, when these arguments are likely to continue unfolding within the narrow procedural framework the judge has set.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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the country physically destroyed. What followed was not peace in a conventional sense, but a tense Cold War standoff between communist North Korea and capitalist South Korea. South Korea's survival depended heavily on its alliance with the United States, while its internal politics were marked by instability, military intervention, and the urgent task of economic development.

See also [Indictment Language Challenged by Defense](#)



The logo of the [Segye Ilbo](#)

Against this dramatic backdrop, a Korean [opinion piece](#) by religious reporter Jeong



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su ([정성수](#)). Photo (2025): [Segye Ilbo](#)

Seong-su published in the daily newspaper Segye Ilbo on 20th February reflects on the lives of two men – Han Sang-guk ([한상국](#)) and Bo Hi Pak ([박보희](#) – 1930-2019) – who, in the author's view, represent a particular model of cooperation between religious conviction and public service.

Both men were members of the [Unification Church](#) – now called the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) – a new religious movement [founded](#) in South Korea in the 1950s. At the same time, both served as military officers and later became involved in diplomacy and international cultural outreach. The [article](#) presents their lives as examples of what it calls “church-state cooperation” ([정교협력](#) – 政教協力): not the fusion of religious institutions with government power, but the idea that individuals motivated by faith can serve the nation in critical moments of history.

For readers unfamiliar with Korean politics of the 1960s, one key episode is especially important. In May 1961, Major General Park Chung-hee ([박정희](#)) led a military coup that overthrew South Korea's fragile civilian government. At that time, the United States – South Korea's principal ally – officially opposed military takeovers, creating uncertainty about whether Washington would support the new regime. South Korea was economically weak and militarily dependent on American assistance. If the United States refused to recognize Park's government, the consequences could have been severe.



On 14th November 1961, Chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction of Korea, **Park Chung-hee** (left), holds talks with U.S. President **John F. Kennedy** (right) at the White House. Lieutenant **Colonel Han Sang-guk** (center left) and Dr. **Paul Crane** (center right) are serving as interpreters. Seated behind them are Korean cabinet members who accompanied Chairman Park. Photo: [Kyunghyang Shinmun](#) / [Wikimedia Commons](#). [Public domain](#) image

In November 1961, Park traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet U.S. President John F. Kennedy in the Oval Office. The future of the U.S.-South Korea alliance was effectively at stake. In high-level diplomacy, especially under tense conditions, language matters enormously. Subtle shifts in tone, nuance, and emphasis can influence political outcomes. Serving as interpreter between the two leaders was Lieutenant Colonel Han Sang-kuk ([한상국](#)). [[See editor's note below](#)]

Although formally listed as a military interpreter, the [Segye Ilbo article](#) argues that Han's role went far beyond technical translation. He was positioned between two heads of state at a delicate historical moment. According to the author, every word choice carried strategic weight. In such circumstances, the interpreter is not merely relaying language; he is mediating political meaning.

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The [article](#) portrays Han as someone who combined professional military discipline with personal religious conscience, suggesting that his faith strengthened his sense of responsibility.

Following this meeting, the United States effectively accepted Park's government, and American military and economic assistance continued – support that proved crucial to South Korea's later development.



Ambassador Han Sang-guk at his ambassadorial residence in Oslo, Norway in the Summer of 1978: Back from left: Viggo Jörgensen, Takeru Kamiyama, Neil Salonen, Doris Orme, Han Sang-guk, his wife Lim Byeong-sook, Ingrid Schneider Jörgensen, Ken Sudo. Front from left: Moon Ye-jin, Moon Heung-jin, Moon Un-jin. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

The [opinion piece](#) traces Han's later career to reinforce this theme. After his military service, according to official Korean *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* records, he became South Korea's ambassador to Norway from June 1976 to November 1980. Later, he held leadership positions in major media organizations, including The Washington Times and [Segye Ilbo](#). While his titles changed – from soldier to diplomat to media executive – the author argues that his fundamental mission remained the same: to safeguard national interests and promote the U.S.-Korea alliance during the Cold War.

The second figure highlighted in the [column](#), Bo Hi Pak, is presented as a complementary example. Like Han, he had a military background and was affiliated with the what is now called the [Family Federation](#). Han Sang-kuk was with his wife Lim Byeong-sook one of the 33 couples who had their [marriage blessed](#) by [Father Moon](#) and [Mother Han](#) in 1961. So were Bo Hi Pak and his wife Yoon Gi-sook.

Pak's story intersects with another pivotal moment in Korean and American history: the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Dr. Bo Hi Pak with former U.S. President **Dwight Eisenhower** at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during the Little Angels children's ballet company's first overseas tour in September 1965. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

During the 1952 U.S. presidential campaign, Eisenhower famously declared, "I shall go to Korea," signaling his determination to resolve the ongoing Korean War. After winning the election, he visited the Korean front lines before even taking office. In 1953, his administration helped bring about the [Korean Armistice Agreement](#), which halted active fighting. Later that year, the United States and South

Korea signed a mutual defense treaty that formalized their long-term security alliance – an agreement that remains the cornerstone of South Korea's national defense today.

More than a decade later, in 1965, Bo Hi Pak organized a performance in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, by the "Little Angels," a Korean children's dance troupe associated with the [Family](#)

Korean children's dance troupe associated with the [Army Federation](#). The performance took place at Eisenhower's home. The symbolism was powerful: children from a country once devastated by war were performing traditional Korean dance before the American leader who had helped secure the [armistice](#) and formalize the alliance. The article interprets this as a moment of "civilian diplomacy", in which cultural expression reinforced political friendship.



*Dr. **Bo Hi Pak** with **Queen Elizabeth II** after a special performance for her at the Royal Court in London in November 1971. Photo: [FFWPU](#)*

Bo Hi Pak continued this approach in subsequent years. He helped arrange performances by the Little Angels at the White House during Richard Nixon's presidency and before Queen Elizabeth II in the United Kingdom. Through music and dance rather than military agreements, he sought to deepen international goodwill toward South Korea. The author describes this as building a bridge of "soft power" on top of the "hard power" foundation created by military alliances and treaties.

For a non-Korean reader, the broader argument of the [opinion piece](#) centers on the relationship between religion and public life. Modern democratic systems, including South Korea's, are built on the principle of separation of church and state. Governments are not supposed to favor a particular religion, and religious institutions do not formally control political authority. The author acknowledges this principle clearly.

However, the [column](#) distinguishes institutional separation from personal conviction. While the state must remain neutral, the individuals who operate within it inevitably bring their beliefs and moral frameworks to their work. The author argues that faith, in the cases of Han Sang-kuk (한상국) and Bo Hi Pak (박보희), did not undermine democracy but rather fortified their sense of duty. In this interpretation, religious belief served as an inner source of integrity, courage, and commitment during moments of national crisis.

The [article](#) does not call for theocratic governance or the merging of religious institutions with political authority. Instead, it highlights historical episodes in which individuals shaped by religious faith played influential roles in diplomacy and cultural outreach. By revisiting these examples, the author suggests that religious values can coexist with democratic governance, provided that formal institutional boundaries are respected.

In essence, the [column](#) presents **Han Sang-kuk as the "voice" of diplomacy during a decisive Cold War meeting** and **Bo Hi Pak as a pioneer of cultural diplomacy** who expanded South Korea's international presence through the arts. Together, they are portrayed as figures who navigated war, ideological conflict, and global politics with both military professionalism and religious conviction.

For readers outside Korea, the [piece](#) offers insight into how some Koreans interpret their nation's rise from wartime devastation to global prominence. It frames that transformation not only in terms of economic policy and military alliances, but also in terms of personal belief, moral commitment, and what the author sees as constructive cooperation between faith and public service.

See also [Indictment Language Challenged by Defense](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Han Sang-guk (left), ca. 1985, and Bo Hi Pak (right) in 1978. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

[Editor's note: There was a U.S. press photograph from 14th November 1961 showing a "Lt. Col. Sanauk Han. Korean interpreter"

seated between President John F. Kennedy and General / Chairman Park Chung-Hee during Park's visit to the White House following the May 1961 military coup. This caption appears in the archival photo record (AP / Alamy), confirming the existence of a Korean military officer by that name serving as an interpreter at that summit.]

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