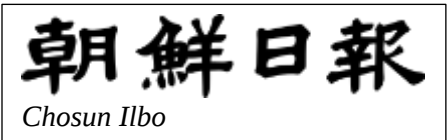


FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korean probe into money of minority believers

Knut Holdhus
March 15, 2026



South Korean trial about religion, politics, and money. Illustration: Chat GPT



Seoul hearing unfolds amid sweeping probe into alleged religion-politics money links, criticized as politically motivated crackdown on conservative religious groups

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pm

The large South Korean daily Chosun Ilbo published on 13th march a [report](#) on the hearing the same day in Seoul Central District Court in a court case that has drawn considerable attention because it touches on the intersection of religion, politics, and allegations of financial influence.



Yoon Yeong-ho Dec. 6, 2020

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The [newspaper writes](#) that at the center of the case are figures connected to [Unificationism](#) (통일교), a religious movement founded in Korea that has long been influential both domestically and internationally. Prosecutors are examining whether individuals linked to the [movement](#) attempted to build relationships with politicians through gifts or money, potentially violating South Korea's strict political funding laws.

One of the people involved in the case is [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호), a former senior official within [Unificationism](#). Yoon previously served as head of the [religious organization's](#) world

headquarters and has been questioned in court about his contacts with politicians. During recent testimony, he described an incident in late 2021 involving a meeting with Kim Sung-tae (김성태), a former lawmaker from South Korea's conservative People Power Party. According to [Yoon's](#) testimony, he went to the meeting prepared with both a gift set and a large sum of cash - 20 million Korean won, equivalent to roughly fifteen thousand US dollars. However, [Yoon](#) told the court that the money and gifts were never actually given to the politician.

According to the [Chosun Ilbo](#), the testimony emerged during a hearing at the Seoul Central District Court

as part of a broader trial concerning possible violations of the Political Funds Act. Several individuals connected to [Unificationism](#) are facing scrutiny in the proceedings, including the organization's leader [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - also called [Mother Han](#) - and Jeong Won-ju (정원주), who previously worked as the head of [Mother Han](#)'s secretariat. Prosecutors are examining whether money or valuables were used to cultivate political connections or influence public officials. The defense, meanwhile, has been questioning witnesses in an effort to clarify what actually happened and whether any illegal transfers of money took place.



Kim Sung-tae, former chairman of the People Power Party Central Committee

During questioning by attorneys representing [Hak Ja Han](#) (83), [Yoon](#) was asked about a meeting he had with former lawmaker Kim Sung-tae (김성태) on 16th December 2021. The meeting took place at a restaurant in Yeouido, a district of Seoul that houses South Korea's National Assembly and many political offices. [Yoon](#) explained that he did not personally arrange the meeting. Instead, he said it had been set up through an introduction from Yoon Jung-ro (윤정로), who previously served as vice chairman of the newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#), a publication historically associated with [Unificationism](#).

When asked whether he had informed [Mother Han](#) about the meeting beforehand, [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호) responded that he might have mentioned it but could not say with certainty. He added that he generally spoke casually with the [religious leader](#) about the people he met during his activities, implying that such meetings were not necessarily treated as formal reports or official

matters.

The [Chosun Ilbo report](#) mentions that a key point of the court's questioning concerned what [Yoon](#) brought with him to the meeting. Lawyers asked whether he had prepared a gift set and 20 million won in cash when he went to see Kim Sung-tae. [Yoon](#) acknowledged that he believed this was the case. However, he suggested that the items may not have been intended specifically for Kim himself. According to [Yoon](#), the idea to prepare the money and gifts may have come from Yoon Jung-ro (윤정로), who reportedly said such items might be necessary. [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) described the money as something connected to broader activities rather than a clearly designated payment for any particular individual.



Kweon Seong-dong (January 2025)

The defense then pressed further, asking whether the cash and gifts were meant to be handed over to Kim or other political figures. [Yoon](#) said he did not know for certain. He told the court that the items remained in the trunk of his car and were never taken out during the meeting. In other words, although he had brought them with him, he said that they were never delivered to the former lawmaker.

[Yoon](#) also addressed the origin of the 20 million won. He testified that the money had been provided by [Mother Han](#) as what he described as "special activity funds". He emphasized that the money did not belong to him personally, implying that it was intended for use in the course of his organizational duties rather than for private purposes.

Another figure mentioned during the hearing was Yoon Jung-ro (윤정로), the former [newspaper](#) executive who had introduced [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) to various politicians. According to information discussed in court, Yoon Jung-ro played a role in arranging contacts between [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) and several members of the People Power Party. One of these was Kweon Seong-dong (권성동), a sitting lawmaker from the party. Reports indicate that on 17th November 2021, Yoon Jung-ro sent messages to [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) saying he had already met with both Kweon and Kim. The following day, he reportedly sent another message indicating that he would arrange a meeting between Yoon and Kweon as well.

The testimony about the meeting with Kim Sung-tae (김성태) is only one element of the wider investigation surrounding the alleged political ties of the religious movement that [Mother Han](#) now leads. The case has attracted significant attention in South Korea partly because it directly or indirectly affects millions of believers. It appears to be part of a wider crackdown by the current left-leaning Lee Jae-

myung (이재명) administration on large churches and religious movements perceived as aligned with conservative politics.



The Yeouido Full Gospel Church, known as the world's largest church, has been targeted. It has historically been associated with anti-communist activism and conservative social causes. So has the Sarang Jeil Church in Seoul. Its head pastor Jeon Kwang-hoon (전광훈), former president of the Christian Council of Korea, has organized several mass rallies in support of the former South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열), a conservative.

Another Christian leader investigated and sentenced recently for mixing politics into his message from the pulpit is Protestant pastor Kim Jin-hong (김진홍) of the "Dure Monastery Community" (두레수도원) which is part of a broader network of institutions he created, including churches, schools, and intentional communities.

Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of the large Segyero Church in Busan was similarly sentenced for "unlawful electioneering" because of - according to himself - urging congregants to support candidates sympathetic to traditional Christian values.

Among the most prominent targets of recent raids and investigations are two large new religious movements - the Shincheonji Church of Jesus [See editor's note below] and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), co-founded and currently led by [Mother Han](#) (83).

Investigations into their finances or political activities is interpreted by supporters as ideological targeting. Critics of the government argue that prosecutors are selectively focusing on conservative religious networks rather than all political-religious connections.

According to the [Chosun Ilbo article](#), for now, the court proceedings are focused on establishing the facts - specifically

whether money or gifts were actually transferred to politicians and whether such actions violated political funding laws. [Yoon Yeong-ho's](#) testimony suggests that although money and gifts may have been prepared for the meeting in question, he insists they were never handed over. Determining whether that account is accurate will likely be a central issue as the trial continues.

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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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March 9, 2026



Logo of the
Sekai Nippo

unlawfulness through inference disregards human rights

“Contrary to the Principle of Evidence-Based Trials,” Says Family Federation Attorney

by editorial staff of Sekai Nippo



The building housing Tokyo High Court and Tokyo District Court.
Photo (2012): Rs1421 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0
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Following the [decision](#) on 4th March by the Tokyo High Court to dismiss the [appeal](#) in the case concerning the dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)), attorney Nobuya Fukumoto (福本修也), representing the appellants, released his opinion on 12th March on his law firm's website and other platforms.

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See also [UN Submission Protests Mass Closure of Churches](#)

See also [“Loss of Appeal Part of Systemic Persecution”](#)

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Fukumoto strongly criticized the [ruling](#), stating that it “**disregards the freedom of religion and human rights of more than 100,000 believers and has effectively handed down a death sentence to a religious corporation based on ‘delusions’ not grounded in fact.**”

Fukumoto argued that the [High Court's decision](#) essentially followed the [ruling issued by the Tokyo District Court](#) in March last year. He said the ruling recognized tort liability based solely on abstract speculation without identifying specific unlawful acts, and therefore “further deepened and expanded the serious defect of violating the principle of evidence-based adjudication.”

In October 2023, the *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* petitioned the Tokyo District Court to dissolve the organization. The ministry cited 32 civil judgments recognizing tort liability as well as settlement cases, claiming that donation-related damages totaled about ¥20.4 billion (around 1,550 victims).

The Tokyo District Court determined that more than 1,500 people suffered damages totaling approximately ¥19.4 billion between around 1980 and 2009.



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Pie charts showing the categories of alleged damages after the [Family Federation's 2009 compliance declaration](#) (left) [See editor's note 1 below] and the determination of tort liability. Original illustration: Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama, English version aided by ChatGPT.



Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama, here in December 2023. Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

Furthermore, according to international lawyer Tatsuki Nakayama (中山達樹), since the [religious organization](#) issued its “Compliance Declaration” [See editor's note 1 below] in 2009, **out of 144 individuals** alleged to have suffered damages in relation to large donations and similar matters, **tort liability has been recognized for only four people** (one through settlement), or 2.8%.

In monetary terms, **about ¥18.6 million out of approximately ¥957 million in alleged damages** – 1.95% –

was found to involve tort liability. Settlements were reached with 132 individuals. Nakayama stated that it is clear that damages have drastically decreased since the compliance declaration [See editor's note 1 below].

The [High Court decision](#) itself acknowledged that **“it cannot be definitively determined” that unlawful acts occurred due to lack of facts and evidence**, while simultaneously stating that “the possibility cannot be denied.”

Fukumoto criticized this reasoning as internally contradictory, saying:

“The court piles inference upon inference until it somehow arrives at a definitive recognition of unlawful acts, and then uses that conclusion to emphasize the necessity of a dissolution order. Such reasoning completely departs from the fundamental structure of judicial proceedings in a rule-of-law state.”

Nakayama also pointed out that it is difficult to claim that there were acts clearly recognized as “seriously harming the public welfare”.

As for the background behind what he called “the adoption of unjust logic”, Fukumoto suggested two factors:



1. The **courts were influenced by a strong social climate (public opinion) demanding that the [Unification Church](#) be destroyed**, leading to a conclusion-driven judgment.
2. Because the **proceedings were conducted as closed-door non-contentious proceedings** [See editor's note 2 below], the court was able to **push through reasoning that would never be accepted in ordinary civil litigation**.

Imbalanced scale of justice and use of speculation in dissolution case behind closed doors. Photo: 991joseph / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image

On 9th March, the [organization](#) filed a special appeal to the Supreme Court.

It plans to challenge the [ruling](#) on the grounds that the [High Court decision](#) contains **serious legal problems, including violations of the Constitution and international law**.

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Featured image above: Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto, here speaking at a press conference in Tokyo 8th September 2023. Screenshot from live transmission by [FFWPU](#)

[Editor's note 1: The **2009 compliance declaration** of the Unification Church of Japan (now the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)) was a formal commitment by the organization to reform its practices in response to longstanding public criticism and legal challenges.

The Unification Church in Japan had faced numerous allegations related to recruitment tactics and donation solicitation, termed “spiritual sales” (霊感商法) by a hostile network of activist lawyers who had declared the religious organization an enemy. These issues led to multiple lawsuits orchestrated by the activist lawyers and significant media backlash. This prompted the organization to take measures to restore its reputation and demonstrate compliance with legal and ethical standards.

The religious organization pledged to stop possibly unethical donation practices, including what the hostile network of lawyers claimed amounted to “pressuring members into making large financial contributions under spiritual pretexts.”

This was in response to accusations from the same activist lawyers that followers “were being manipulated into giving away substantial amounts of money or property.”

The Unification Church stated it would enhance internal oversight to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards. Measures included better training for leaders and stricter guidelines for evangelization and solicitation of donations.

After this compliance declaration, there was a significant decrease in the number of lawsuits against the Unification Church – since 2015 called the Family Federation. The religious organization has used this as evidence that it has improved its practices and should not be subject to dissolution.]

[Editor's note 2: A **non-contentious case** refers to a legal matter where there is no dispute between parties. These cases typically involve administrative, procedural, or uncontested legal actions, such as **probate (handling a deceased person's estate), uncontested divorces, adoption, or registering a trademark**. Since there are no opposing parties or legal conflicts, these cases usually proceed smoothly through the legal system without litigation.]

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