

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's Government Selects Churches to Remain Open

Knut Holdhus
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Protesting "church closure bill" proposed by left-leaning Lee Jae-myung administration. Illustration: ChatGPT

The Korea Times
The Korea Times

South Korea's controversial religion bill sparks fierce debate over Lee administration's obvious attempt to exercise extensive state power over religion as "church closures" loom

"[Why Korea's new religion bill is rattling Protestant churches](#)" was the headline of an [article](#) published by The Korea Times on 17th April. The English-language daily writes that South Korea is once again confronting a sensitive and deeply rooted constitutional question: how far should the state go in regulating religion, particularly when faith-based organizations are accused of intersecting with politics?

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A newly proposed amendment to the Civil Act from the left-leaning Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration has ignited a contentious national debate, exposing fault lines not only between lawmakers and religious leaders, but also within the country's diverse Protestant community. The bill, which, according to the governing coalition, aims to sanction religious groups accused of systematic political interference, has drawn strong reactions - ranging from support among liberally minded scholars to alarm and resistance among conservative church leaders.

At the center of the controversy lies a push by the current Lee administration for the political realm to control the religious realm, in a way similar to recent steps for the political branch of government to control the country's judiciary.

The new legislation was introduced by the governing parties in the wake of developments in Japan, where a court ordered the dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) following allegations tied to its political entanglements. Inspired in part by that precedent, South Korean lawmakers are now considering whether similar legal mechanisms are necessary to prevent what they describe as "religious organizations exerting undue political influence or violating election laws under the guise of

spiritual activity."

	
Controversial new law interpreted as targeting the Shincheonji Church of Jesus	Controversial new law interpreted as targeting the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification

According to [The Korea Times](#), the proposed bill would grant the government the authority to revoke legal recognition of religious organizations and even confiscate their assets if they are found to have "engaged in political interference that harms the public interest." While the measure is widely interpreted as targeting controversial groups such as the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji Church of Jesus [See editor's note below], its

language is broad enough to raise concerns about potential overreach. Critics argue that the bill's lack of precise definitions could allow authorities to apply it selectively - or even politically - against mainstream religious institutions.


<i>Kept long-term in tiny cell under inhuman conditions after expressing his views on policies of the Lee administration: Pastor Son Hyun-bo (August 2025)</i>

<i>Mike Johnson, speaker of the United States House of Representatives since 2023. Here, at the IRF Summit Jan. 31, 2024</i>

This ambiguity has fueled anxiety among Protestant leaders, particularly those aligned with conservative or politically active congregations. Many pastors perceive the legislation not as a narrowly tailored regulatory tool, but as a potential instrument of suppression. Some have gone so far as to label it a "Church Closure Act", warning that it could be used to silence religious voices critical of the government. For these leaders, preaching on social or political issues is not an abuse of religious freedom but an essential component of their faith practice.

The debate has been especially intense among figures who have previously engaged in political advocacy. For instance, pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of the Segyero Church (세계로교회) in Busan who supported former conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) and participated in election-related activities, argue that his actions were mischaracterized as illegal campaigning. Conservative pastors contend that expressing moral or political views from a religious platform should not be equated with partisan interference. From their perspective, the principle of separating religion and state is meant to prevent state control over religion - not to exclude religious perspectives from public discourse.

This interpretation, however, is not universally accepted. Legal scholars and theologians have pointed out that the constitutional principle in question - South Korea's prohibition on establishing a state religion and its mandate for separation - serves a dual purpose. It protects religious freedom while also safeguarding democratic institutions from undue influence by organized faith groups. In this view, the issue is not whether religious individuals can participate in politics, but whether institutional religion should wield structured political power.

Interestingly, the Korean debate echoes similar tensions in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States, where the concept of church-state separation has long been contested. There, [The Korea Times](#) points out, some political and religious leaders, e.g. House Speaker Mike Johnson, argue that the principle has been misinterpreted, claiming it was intended to shield religious institutions from government interference rather than to exclude religion from policymaking. This perspective has

gained traction alongside the rise of what the article calls "Christian nationalism", a movement that seeks to integrate religious identity more directly into national politics.

Back in South Korea, however, many within the broader Protestant community are urging caution. Major

umbrella organizations, like United Christian Churches of Korea and the National Council of Churches in Korea, representing a wide spectrum of churches have expressed concern about the bill's potential for misuse. They do not necessarily oppose the "progressive" Lee Jae-myung administration's goal of dismantling and seizing the assets of what some traditional Christians perceive as "heretical" movements, like the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji Church of Jesus [See editor's note below]. Yet, South Korean protestants generally emphasize the need for clear legal standards and safeguards against administrative abuse. Without such protections, they warn, the legislation could inadvertently undermine religious freedom rather than strengthen it.

At the same time, a number of theologians and church scholars are calling attention to the risks of politicizing religion itself. They argue that when religious institutions become closely aligned with political agendas, they risk compromising their moral authority. Faith, in this sense, becomes instrumentalized - used as a tool to advance specific political goals rather than as a source of ethical guidance. Over time, this can erode public trust in religious organizations and blur the distinction between spiritual leadership and political activism.

Some scholars have also highlighted the broader societal implications of the current debate. As public attention focuses on constitutional interpretation and political conflict, there is a risk that the stated motivation behind the bill - addressing legal violations by certain religious groups - may be sidelined by an administration seeking control over the religious realm.

Ultimately, the debate over South Korea's proposed religion bill raises fundamental questions about the relationship between religion and politics in today's highly polarized world. Authoritarian states already have next to total control over religion. What is truly striking, is how powerful politicians in democratic nation like South Korea and Japan have become advocates of a policy toward religion that is reminiscent of how today's China deals with the religious issue.

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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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Mental Health Risks Emerge After Dissolution

April 18, 2026 • Knut Holdhus



Survey Shows Japanese Government Crackdown on Family Federation Linked to Rising Mental Health Risks Among Believers

Tokyo, 16th April 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

[Part 8 of a Series] In Search of a Spiritual Anchor – One Month After the Dissolution of the Family Federation

Psychiatrists Analyze Harm to Believers

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

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On 4th March, the Tokyo High Court decided to uphold the order to dissolve the religious corporation of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly known as the *Unification Church*). As a result, liquidation procedures are now progressing at church facilities across the country.

Amid this, the "Second Generation Association for Protecting the Human Rights of Believers" – headed by Nozomi Kojima (小島希晶) – an organization formed by second-generation



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members of the [Family Federation](#), conducted an online survey targeting believers (8th-16th March; total responses: 2,240). The results have been published on their [website](#).

The published findings also include analyses by psychiatrists and other specialists, who have articulated the psychological suffering experienced by believers who have lost their “spiritual anchor”, something often difficult for non-believers to understand.

According to a report by a psychiatrist titled “*The Impact of the Dissolution of the [Unification Church](#) on Believers’ Health*,” numerous adverse mental health effects were reported, including worsening depressive states and the onset of insomnia. Among respondents receiving treatment for mental illness – though a minority – there were also reports of worsening suicidal ideation and even suicide attempts.

Based on the health issues revealed by the survey, the report points to multiple contributing factors, including the loss of religious community, intense criticism on social media, and severe conflicts within families. It proposes several support measures that should be considered:

1. Assistance in forming alternative social communities
2. Securing places to conduct religious activities
3. Promoting social understanding to reduce stigma (discrimination and prejudice)
4. Establishing counseling systems

Another psychiatrist’s report, titled “*Considerations on the Current Situation and Issues Facing Believers Following the Dissolution of the [Family Federation](#)*”, highlights two particularly common responses in the survey: “We no longer have a place to gather” and “We can no longer carry out the religious activities we used to.”

To explain the role of communities formed around shared beliefs, the reporting physician uses the example of family support groups for dementia patients. For caregivers, the feeling that “no one understands how difficult this is” can be a major source of stress. However, sharing experiences within a group of people facing similar situations can make one feel “greatly relieved, even without external support”.



Nozomi Kojima, representative of “[The Second-Generation Association for Protecting the Human Rights of Believers](#)”, here speaking at a press conference on 26th March 2025 in Shibuya, Tokyo. Photo: Screenshot from video recording by [FFWPU](#).



The state took their places of worship. Must hold worship services in parks. Here, AI illustration of [Family Federation](#) members gathering in a Japanese park for their Sunday meeting 5th April 2026.

Similarly, the report analyzes that for believers – who have long been socially criticized as belonging to a “cult” and often felt compelled to hide their faith – having a community where they could openly engage was likely a significant emotional support. In cases where entire families belonged to the [religious organization](#), losing that community could become a serious issue.

The report further explains the difficulties arising from being unable to continue religious practices. Even if religious rituals had provided a sense of emotional relief, losing the ability to engage in those activities can feel “like being unable to breathe”, causing considerable distress. The more devout the believers, the more the rejection of their faith can be perceived as a rejection of their “life”, “purpose”, and “meaning of existence”, raising concerns that many may lose their will to live.

Additionally, a physician affiliated with a society for spiritual care commented,

“The loss of a religious foundation due to a dissolution order can shake the very sense of self-worth of second-generation believers – those born as the embodiment of their parents’ faith – and cause deep suffering that evokes thoughts of death.”

Kojima, head of the [Second-Generation Association](#), expressed concern about the survey results:

“The situation that emerged was more tragic than we had imagined. We confirmed serious realities, including reports of physical violence, cases where individuals began seeking medical treatment due to mental health issues, instances of job loss, and experiences of discrimination in educational settings.”

She added,

“For particularly severe cases that do exist, we plan to carefully document them to prevent further harm, engage in discussions grounded in actual conditions, and share these findings.”

In the future, a prolonged [liquidation](#) process and similar developments may create situations where differences in perception between believers and non-believers lead to conflict. It is hoped that these reports will provide clues for bridging that divide.

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Featured image above: A church facility of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) in Tokyo stands empty due to liquidation procedures – 2nd April 2026, Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

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