

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's Shocking Detention of Aged Minister

Knut Holdhus
June 24, 2026



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

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)

A portrait of Jeong Seong-su, a man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue shirt. He is looking directly at the camera.

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Mother Han (83) no longer oldest religious leader in inhuman long-term pretrial detention in South Korea as Shincheonji head (95) is placed in tiny cell

On 23rd June 2026, the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) published an [opinion column](#) by religion reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) about a controversial legal development involving Lee Man-hee (이만희). South Korean prosecutors and police had requested an arrest warrant for Lee, the 95-year-old founder and leader of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. The [column](#) does not argue that Lee is innocent. Instead, it asks a broader question: How should a democratic society use its power to investigate and detain very elderly religious leaders?

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Shincheonji is one of the country's most persecuted religious movements. It operates within a particularly sensitive social context in Korea. Given the scrutiny this minority faith often receives from the media, allegations of political connections or

collusion frequently attract heightened public attention and debate. Many Koreans view new religious movements - not only Shincheonji - negatively, while members argue that they face discrimination because of their faith.

Against that backdrop, any criminal investigation involving such movements quickly becomes politically and emotionally charged. [Jeong's column](#) is therefore less about the specific allegations against Lee and more about the principles that should govern the state's use of coercive power.

The central argument: detention should be exceptional



Being investigated and according to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as "pseudo-religion": the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Here, its logo. Jeong begins from a point that many readers would consider uncontroversial: religious leaders are not above the law. If there is evidence of wrongdoing, they should be investigated and judged by the courts like anyone else. The author explicitly rejects the idea that religion provides immunity from legal accountability.

However, he then draws an important distinction that is central to many modern legal systems: being investigated is not the same as being detained before trial. In South Korea, as in many countries, pretrial detention is supposed to be an exceptional measure used mainly when there is a serious risk that a suspect will flee or destroy evidence. According to Jeong, public anger or the seriousness of an allegation alone should not automatically justify detention.

He worries that, in highly emotional cases involving unpopular religious groups, society may become too willing to treat detention as a form of punishment before a court has reached a verdict.

Why Lee Man-hee's age matters

The most striking feature of the case, Jeong argues, is Lee's age. Born in 1931, Lee was 95 years old at the time of the warrant request. Shincheonji stated that he had cooperated with investigators and posed no flight risk, though the author acknowledges that the court - not the religious organization - must decide whether that claim is credible.

Jeong's point is not that old age should exempt someone from prosecution. Rather, he argues that extreme old age changes the practical and humanitarian considerations surrounding detention. A person in their mid-nineties may appear healthy one day and become seriously ill the next. Even a change in living

environment can have major health consequences for the very elderly. Because of this, he suggests that judges should weigh not only legal factors but also the human impact of detention.



The Shincheonji Peace Palace in Cheongpyeong-myeon, on the same lake where the [Family Federation](#) has large facilities, in Gapyeong, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea

A broader concern about elderly religious leaders

To illustrate his concern, Jeong refers to another prominent Korean religious figure, 83-year-old [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). During legal proceedings involving her [organization](#), there were public discussions about her health, including reports that existing medical conditions worsened and that she experienced several falls while in detention.

Jeong uses this example to argue that legal responsibility and human dignity are not mutually exclusive. An elderly person can still be held accountable under the law, but the state should avoid unnecessary measures that create disproportionate physical or psychological harm.

The danger of emotional justice

One of the [column](#)'s strongest themes is the distinction between legal judgment and social hostility. Jeong argues that when a religious group becomes widely persecuted, public emotions can begin to influence how people think about criminal procedure. In his view, this is dangerous because the rule of law requires consistent standards.



[Mother Han](#) (83) being temporarily released on March 27, 2026 for urgent medical treatment after being held detained in a tiny cell for more than six months

A minority religion should not face harsher treatment simply because it is controversial. Conversely, a socially respected religion should not receive special protection. The same legal criteria should apply to all groups, regardless of whether the public admires or distrusts them.

What the rule of law means

Jeong presents a relatively classical understanding of the rule of law. The true test of a democracy, he argues, is not how much power the state possesses, but how carefully it restrains itself when using that power. Governments may have the authority to investigate, arrest, and detain, but they should not automatically use every power available to them.

Because detention restricts a person's physical liberty before a final conviction, it deserves especially careful scrutiny. Decisions about detention should be based on legal standards such as flight risk and evidence tampering, not on public outrage or symbolic politics.

Freedom of religion and state neutrality

The [column](#) also touches on the principle of separation between religion and the state. Jeong argues that this principle does not mean religious organizations are exempt from the law. If a religious group commits illegal acts, those acts should be prosecuted.

What the state must avoid, he says, is treating religion itself as a social evil or using religious leaders as symbolic targets to satisfy public anger. In other words, prosecute alleged crimes, but do not criminalize a faith community as such.

The conclusion

Jeong ends by emphasizing that he is not declaring Lee Man-hee or [Hak Ja Han](#) innocent. Questions of guilt or innocence belong to the courts. The [Segye Ilbo](#) religion correspondent's concern is procedural and ethical: when the state exercises coercive power against very elderly religious leaders, it should do so with exceptional restraint, careful reasoning, and respect for human dignity.

For an international audience, the significance of the [column](#) lies in this broader debate. The [article](#) is not simply a defense of a persecuted religious movement. It is an argument about how democratic societies should balance public criticism of unpopular groups, equal application of the law, and humanitarian considerations for very elderly defendants. Whether readers ultimately agree with Jeong's conclusions or not, the [column](#) raises a question that extends far beyond South Korea: How can a state remain firm in enforcing the law while also remaining restrained, impartial, and humane?

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[Editorial]

Supreme Court Orders Dissolution of Family Federation Based on Speculation, Ignoring Religious Freedom

by the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*



Forced to hold worship services at home: AI-illustration of members of the *Family Federation* in Japan gathering, 15th March 2026.

The Supreme Court has dismissed the *special appeal* filed by the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly known as the *Unification Church*), finalizing the dissolution of the *religious corporation*. The *organization* had argued that the dissolution *violated the Constitution*, which guarantees freedom of religion. It also maintained that lawsuits concerning excessive donations and related issues had become extremely rare after the *religious organization's* 2009 “Compliance Declaration” [See editor's note below] and therefore did not justify dissolution.

The Supreme Court's decision states that the dissolution “does not entail any legal effect whatsoever that prohibits or restricts believers' religious activities.” However, since the *Tokyo High Court's dissolution order* on 4th March, which triggered the legal effects of *liquidation*, believers have been unable to enter church buildings, and church funerals and weddings can no longer be held. Prohibiting such important events in people's lives is effectively equivalent to infringing upon fundamental human freedoms. Furthermore, the testimonies of many believers were not taken into consideration at all.

Regarding the *religious organization's* past misconduct cited in the ruling, the improvements made after the “Compliance Declaration” [See editor's note below] were ignored. The Court reasoned that “in the future, with respect to believers”, there remains a risk that the *organization* could “solicit donations by setting numerical targets that are difficult or impossible to achieve,” and that it is “highly likely” such solicitation practices could occur. Based on this assessment, the Court decided to dissolve the *religious organization*. Many experts – including lawyers, constitutional scholars, journalists, and commentators – have pointed out that a dissolution order based on *speculation* is problematic.



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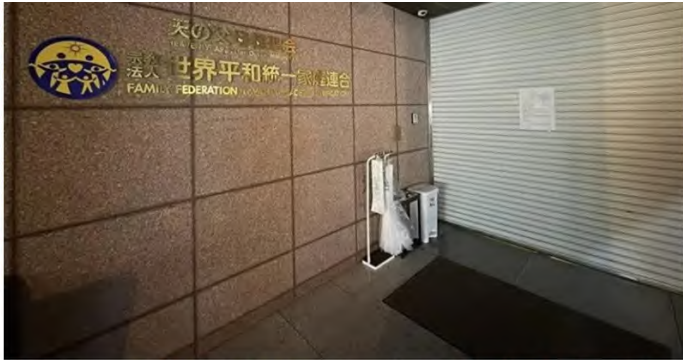
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State closed down 260 churches of the [Family Federation](#) overnight. Here, the Japanese headquarters of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) in Shibuya, Tokyo, where a court-appointed liquidator had entered. Photo taken on 4th March 2026. Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

Most troubling of all is that the ruling has completely [fulfilled the objective of the defendant](#) in the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), whose motive was to vent his resentment toward the [religious organization](#) to which his mother belonged. At the same time, public opinion has shown little criticism of the assassination of a politician itself.

Featured image above: The Supreme Court of Japan.
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[Editor's note: 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](#).]

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