

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Did Japan ban Family Fed from anti-Korean bias?

Knut Holdhus
June 25, 2026



Faith of Korean origins in Japan. Illustration

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Japan's Family Federation dissolution ruling linked to broader history of distrust and long-standing suspicion of religions of foreign origins

In a 25th June 2026 [opinion column](#) published in the South Korean daily newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#), religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) argues that Japan's recent court-ordered dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea often referred to as [Unificationism](#) (통일교) - raises broader questions about religious liberty, democratic principles, and the relationship between public sentiment and judicial authority.

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The [column](#) was written shortly after Japan's [Supreme Court](#) finalized a [lower-court decision](#) ordering the dissolution of the [religious corporation](#). While acknowledging that court rulings deserve respect and that unlawful conduct should be addressed through legal processes, Jeong expresses concern that the case may represent a [troubling precedent](#) in which popular hostility toward a religious minority has overshadowed fundamental

protections for freedom of religion.

According to the author, the central issue is not whether individuals who allegedly suffered harm many years ago should receive justice, nor whether criticized fundraising or donation practices should be subject to legal scrutiny. Rather, the question is whether dissolving an entire [religious corporation](#) constitutes a proportionate response to the violations identified by the courts. Jeong notes that Japanese authorities relied primarily on findings of civil wrongdoing related to donation practices rather than criminal convictions involving senior leaders of the [organization](#). In his view, this distinction is significant because the case marks the first time in modern Japanese constitutional history that a [religious corporation](#) has been dissolved on the basis of civil violations rather than serious criminal misconduct.

The columnist traces the origins of the controversy to the 2022 assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三). The assassin claimed that his family had suffered financial difficulties due to his mother's donations to the [religious organization](#). He cited this grievance as a motive for the attack. Jeong argues that while such claims deserved investigation and victims' concerns warranted attention, the actions of a lone criminal and the continued existence of an entire [religious body](#) are fundamentally different matters. He suggests that a combination of intense media scrutiny, political distancing, and rapidly deteriorating public opinion created an environment in which collective blame came to be assigned to the [religious organization](#) itself.



The crucifixion of the 26 Catholic martyrs of Nagasaki, Japan 5th Feb. 1597

A major theme of the [article](#) is the danger posed when public anger exerts excessive influence over legal and political institutions. Jeong contends that democratic societies are most vulnerable when emotional reactions and majority sentiment overwhelm principled protections for minority rights. In his interpretation, freedom of religion exists precisely to safeguard groups that may be unpopular or controversial. Rights that are granted only to organizations enjoying broad social approval cease to function as genuine freedoms and instead become privileges extended selectively by the majority.

The author also places the controversy within a longer historical framework. He argues that Japan's modern reputation as a democratic society committed to religious freedom should not obscure historical patterns of suspicion toward foreign-origin religions and unfamiliar faith traditions. The [column](#) recalls the [persecution of Christians](#) during earlier periods of Japanese history, when many believers were

executed and others were forced to conceal their faith for generations. It further references the difficulties faced by Korean religious and cultural communities during the colonial era, as well as the state's efforts after the Meiji Restoration to establish an emperor-centered religious order through State Shinto.



The Meiji Emperor among gods and emperors. This 1878 engraving by Toyohara Chikanobu (1838 - 1912) visually presents the central tenet of State Shinto (1871-1946). This Shinto variant asserted and promoted belief in the divinity of the Emperor, which arose from a genealogical family tree extending back to the first emperor and to the most important deities of Japanese mythology. Emperor Meiji in a Western chair with his wife, Empress Shōken, is seated in the foreground

Jeong suggests that contemporary hostility toward the [Family Federation](#) cannot be entirely separated from these historical experiences. In his [analysis](#), the [movement](#) has faced not only opposition to its beliefs and practices but also an additional burden arising from its Korean origins. The author implies that questions of national identity, historical memory, and cultural difference may have contributed to the intensity of public opposition directed toward the [organization](#) in Japan. Jeong writes,

"During the period of Japanese colonial rule, the religious traditions and ethnic religions maintained by Koreans in Japan as a means of preserving their identity were likewise far from welcomed. Furthermore, after the Meiji Restoration [1868], the state established the State Shinto system, imposing an emperor-centered religious order on the population and creating a powerful culture of conformity through the alliance of religion and state power. The hostility now directed toward [Unificationism](#) cannot be separated from this historical and cultural context. In Japan, [Unificationism](#) has carried not only a religious stigma but also the additional burden of being perceived as a religion that originated in Korea."

At the same time, the [column](#) argues that any historical assessment of the [Family Federation](#) should include consideration of both its positive and negative contributions. Jeong points to the participation of some Japanese members in anti-communist civic activism during the ideological conflicts of the 1970s. He also notes that [large-scale international marriages](#) involving Japanese and Korean participants have often been presented by supporters as contributing to people-to-people exchanges and reconciliation efforts between the two countries during periods of strained bilateral relations. While not dismissing criticism of the [organization](#), the author cautions against reducing a complex [religious movement](#) to a single negative image without acknowledging other dimensions of its history.



The [article](#) further highlights concerns that have been voiced outside Japan. Jeong cites observations made in reports on international religious freedom, including statements describing the dissolution effort as a departure from established practice because it relied on civil violations rather than criminal offenses. He interprets such comments as evidence that international observers view the case as having significance beyond Japan's domestic legal system. For the author, the issue touches on broader questions regarding the treatment of religious minorities and the limits of state authority over religious organizations. Reporter

Jeong writes,

"In its [International Religious Freedom Report](#), the U.S. Department of State described the Japanese government's request for the dissolution of the [Family Federation](#) as a "deviation from the norm." The [report](#) noted that this was the first effort to dissolve a [religious corporation](#) on the basis of civil violations rather than criminal offenses. This demonstrates that the international community is closely monitoring the issue not merely as a domestic matter, but as one involving the universal principle of religious freedom."

In its concluding sections, the [column](#) returns to the philosophical and historical meaning of religious freedom. Jeong argues that governments possess the power to dissolve legal entities and organizations, but they cannot eliminate personal belief or religious conviction. Drawing comparisons to the survival of religious communities under persecution in various historical contexts, he contends that faith traditions often endure even when institutional structures are dismantled.

The author concludes by predicting that the Japanese [Family Federation](#) will face substantial administrative and organizational difficulties as a result of the [court decision](#), yet will continue to exist as a faith community. More broadly, he argues that the ultimate significance of the ruling will be determined not only by contemporary legal standards but also by future historical judgment. In his view, the central question that remains open is whether Japan's courts dissolved only a [religious corporation](#) or whether the decision also narrowed the scope of the religious freedom that democratic societies are expected to protect.

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Shocking Pretrial Detention Of Faith Leader (95)

June 24, 2026 • The News Desk



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oldest religious leader in
inhuman long-term pretrial
detention in South Korea as
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SHINCHEONJI HEAD (95) IS placed in tiny cell



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

On 23rd June 2026, the South Korean daily

세계일보
The logo of the Segye Ilbo

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?

See also Mother Han Trial Set to Conclude on 10th July

See also “Church Closure” Risks in South Korea’s New Bill

See also Religion-State: The Danger of Policing Belief

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.



Being investigated and according to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as “pseudo-religion”: the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Here, its logo.

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

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



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The Shincheonji (신천지) Peace Palace in Cheongpyeong-myeon, on the same lake where the [Family Federation](#) has large facilities, in Gapyeong, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea. Photo (2020): Jhcbs1019 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#)

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.

A broader concern about elderly religious leaders



To

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

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.

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?

See also [Mother Han Trial Set to Conclude on 10th July](#)

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Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: Lee Man-hee (이만희), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth).

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