

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Should S Korea Only Allow Regime Controlled Religions?

Knut Holdhus
July 3, 2026



Some religions becoming state preferences in democracies like South Korea

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Why religious freedom in democracies depends on state neutrality: Recognition becoming preference easily gives rise to an unofficial religious hierarchy and discrimination

On 1st July 2026, religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) of the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo published an [opinion column](#) examining an enduring constitutional question: what does genuine religious freedom require of a democratic state? His [discussion](#) focuses not on legal prohibitions against religion, but on the more subtle ways in which governments may appear to privilege certain faiths through longstanding public customs and ceremonial practices. The [article](#) argues that the true test of religious liberty is found not in the treatment of large, socially influential religious traditions, but in the extent to which minority religions enjoy equal protection and recognition under the constitutional order.

See also ["Church Closure" Risks in South Korea's New Bill](#)

See also [Religion-State: The Danger of Policing Belief](#)

The starting point for the [discussion](#) is the Constitution of the Republic of Korea. It guarantees every citizen freedom of religion while simultaneously declaring that there shall be no state religion and that religion and government are institutionally

separate. Together, these provisions establish a principle of governmental neutrality toward matters of faith. Rather than endorsing or opposing particular religious traditions, the state is expected to maintain an equal relationship with all religions, allowing individuals to determine their own beliefs without official preference or discrimination.

The [column](#) observes, however, that constitutional principles and public practice do not always coincide. In South Korea's public life, the country's largest religious communities - especially Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity - frequently occupy a prominent place in official ceremonies. Presidents and other senior government officials regularly attend important commemorative events

organized by these traditions, while national occasions often include representatives from these major faiths. Such participation may be understandable given their historical development, membership, and social influence, but it nevertheless raises questions about whether repeated state engagement with a limited number of religious organizations creates an appearance of unequal treatment.



President Syngman Rhee looking at the Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Korea in 1948. It was first adopted in 1948 and amended several times. It establishes the country as a democratic republic founded on popular sovereignty, the rule of law, and the separation of powers. It guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, provides for a directly elected president, a unicameral National Assembly, and an independent judiciary headed by the Constitutional Court of Korea

To explain this phenomenon, Jeong refers to an academic concept sometimes described as a "recognized religion" (공인교 - 公認敎 - gongin-gyo) structure. The term does not suggest that South Korea has legally established religions comparable to those found in countries with official churches or state-supported faiths. Instead, it describes a sociological situation in which certain religious organizations acquire an unofficial public status because they are repeatedly treated as the primary representatives of religion in national life. Through government protocol, ceremonial participation, and institutional practice, these communities may come to enjoy symbolic authority that exceeds their formal legal position.



The flag of Daejongism, a modern Korean nationalist religion founded by Na Cheol in 1909 that venerates the legendary progenitor Dangun as a divine ancestor, emphasizing Korean identity, ethical living, reverence for Korea's divine origins, and spiritual renewal rooted in indigenous traditions

From this perspective, constitutional equality may coexist with informal hierarchies in everyday governance. The law itself may treat all religions equally, yet social and political customs can nevertheless communicate that some faiths possess greater legitimacy or representativeness than others. The concern is therefore not one of explicit legal discrimination but of accumulated symbolic preference that gradually shapes public expectations about which religions belong at the center of civic life.

The [article](#) places this discussion within a broader historical framework by recalling religious policy during Japan's colonial administration of Korea between 1910 and 1945. Colonial authorities did not adopt a policy of unrestricted religious freedom.

Instead, they distinguished among religious groups according to political considerations, incorporating some into administrative structures while closely monitoring or suppressing others, particularly those associated with Korean nationalism and the independence movement. Indigenous religious traditions, including Daejonggyo (대종교 - also rendered

as Daejongism), experienced especially severe restrictions because of their connection to resistance against colonial rule. In his 1st July [article](#), Jeong writes,

"This colonial method of rule left behind a way of thinking in which the state classified and managed religions. Although, after liberation, the Republic of Korea declared the separation of religion and state through its Constitution, social practices did not change overnight. Some scholars invoke the concept of a "recognized religion" precisely to explain this historical continuity."



Japanese infantry marching through the main street of Seoul in 1905. Korea was under Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945. Already in 1905, however, after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, Korea was forced to accept the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905, becoming a Japanese protectorate. While annexation did not occur until 1910, Korea had already lost most of its effective sovereignty by 1905

Jeong does not argue that contemporary South Korea simply reproduces colonial religious policy. Rather, he notes that some scholars view present-day patterns through the lens of historical continuity, suggesting that habits of classifying and managing religious organizations may have left lasting institutional influences. At the same time, he acknowledges that existing historical evidence does not permit definitive conclusions about direct continuity between colonial administration and current governmental practice. The reference to history therefore serves primarily as a context for understanding how institutional traditions sometimes outlive the political systems that first created them.

The [column](#) ultimately returns to constitutional principles rather than historical causation. If the state is committed to religious neutrality, it must avoid both hostility toward religion and symbolic favoritism. Equal treatment requires more than the absence of discriminatory laws; it also demands that official conduct consistently reflect impartiality. Repeated ceremonial preferences, even when well intentioned, may influence public perception by suggesting that certain religions enjoy a closer relationship with the state than others.

This issue becomes particularly significant when considering minority religions. Large, well-established religious organizations generally possess sufficient social acceptance and institutional resources to participate confidently in public life. Smaller or newer religious communities, by contrast, often lack comparable visibility and may already face social suspicion or misunderstanding. According to the argument advanced in the [column](#), constitutional guarantees demonstrate their greatest value precisely when they protect those groups whose beliefs or practices fall outside the mainstream.

Such protection, however, should not be misunderstood as immunity from legal accountability. Religious freedom does not exempt any organization or individual from compliance with criminal law or other legal obligations. Allegations of fraud, abuse, violence, or other unlawful conduct must be investigated and prosecuted regardless of the religious identity of those involved. The crucial principle is that legal judgments should rest on objective violations of law rather than on the popularity, size, or public reputation of a particular religious movement.

Jeong concludes that the health of a democratic society can be measured by the extent to which it preserves genuine neutrality among competing religious traditions. Government institutions should neither establish official religions nor create informal systems in which only a small number of faiths receive consistent public recognition. Instead, constitutional equality should extend equally to majority and minority religions, old and new religious movements alike. Jeong emphasizes,

"Korea is a country with no established state religion. It should now become a country that also avoids creating a 'recognized religion' structure - that is, an 'invisible state religion'. That is what the Constitution means by religious freedom, and it is, ultimately, the form of society that comes closest to the essence of democracy."

See also ["Church Closure" Risks in South Korea's New Bill](#)

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Japanese Court Assumes The Role Of Inquisitor

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eradicate the Family Federation



Masumi Fukuda speaking at the [press conference](#) in Brussels on 29th June 2026. Screenshot from live transmission by [HRWF](#)

Part 2 of a speech given by Japanese investigative journalist and prize-winning author Masumi Fukuda (福田ますみ) at a [press conference](#) on the theme “Japan: The Hidden Story Behind the Eradication of a Religion”, held at the Brussels Press Club in Brussels, Belgium on 29th June 2026, organized by [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#) (HRWF), an independent non-profit

NGO. Translated from the transcription of the original Japanese, slightly edited.

Continued from part 1: [The Hidden Story Japan Doesn't Want You to Hear](#)

Why, then, was the [Unification Church](#) [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) ordered to dissolve?

The answer is



Japanese man offering a donation to support spreading the word. Illustration: Miocrosoft Designer Image Creator, 21st January 2025.

surprising: primarily because of disputes over [donations](#).

Donations are indispensable to any religious organization. However, Japanese courts have ruled that when a religious organization accepts donations that exceed what society considers reasonable, those donations may be deemed unlawful.

In earlier court cases, the typical reasoning was that people had been induced to donate through fear – for example, by being told that they or their ancestors would suffer misfortune or go to hell unless they made donations. In other words, the courts found that they had been pressured or intimidated into giving money.

Over the years, many civil lawsuits were filed against the [Unification Church](#) [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#), and the [church](#) lost many of them. I will explain later why so many lawsuits were brought.

I will not go into the details of those cases today, but in many instances the plaintiffs prevailed despite lacking convincing evidence. In my view, a series of unjust judgments accumulated over time.

I believe this happened because almost none of Japan's judges have any religious faith, and many tend to view new religious movements such as the [Unification Church](#) [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) through the lens of prejudice, seeing



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[editor's note 1 below](#)] through the lens of prejudice, seeing them simply as cults. It may also be that, given the overwhelmingly negative media coverage, judges feared that ruling in favor of the [church](#) [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) would damage public confidence in the courts.

More recently, the courts have gone even further. They have ruled that believers may sincerely think they donated of their own free will, yet were actually subjected to improper psychological influence without realizing it, making the donations unlawful.

This is an extraordinary conclusion. It comes very close to saying that having religious faith is itself a form of victimization. In effect, it amounts to recognizing the controversial theory of “mind control” [\[See editor's note 2 below\]](#).

In addition to these civil judgments, something even more remarkable occurred in the dissolution proceedings.

The court treated settlements and out-of-court agreements between the [church](#) and former members as evidence that the [church](#) [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) had committed unlawful acts. On that basis, the court issued the [dissolution order](#).

In other words, the outcomes of civil disputes – which were simply a means of resolving disagreements over donations between the [church](#) [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) and former members – were used as the legal foundation for dissolving the entire [religious organization](#).

Furthermore, in the dissolution case, the court concluded, without any concrete evidence, that the [church](#) [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) would probably continue causing problems related to [large donations](#) in the future.

The court even went so far as to examine the [church's](#) religious doctrines and teachings, concluding that because it was an undesirable religion, there was little prospect that it would reform itself.



An auto-da-fé (Public ceremony announcing and enforcing sentences by the Inquisition, often executions.) of the Spanish Inquisition and the execution of sentences by burning heretics on the stake in a market place. Wood engraving by Bocort after H.D. Linton. Photo: Wellcome Collection gallery (2018-03-23). License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

Until now, this would have been unthinkable in Japan. Japanese courts have traditionally regarded it as taboo to pass judgment on the content of religious doctrine. It was inconceivable that a court would evaluate whether a religion's teachings were good or bad.

The court, in effect, assumed the role of an inquisitor.

For these reasons, I believe the [dissolution order](#) is entirely unjust.

It cannot be regarded as a fair judgment based on strict evidentiary standards, because the existence of unlawful

conduct was never adequately established.

It is also true that this one-sided decision was made against the backdrop of years of highly biased media coverage portraying the [Unification Church](#) [\[See editor's note below\]](#) as nothing more than a cult.

How did things reach this point?

Continued from part 1: [The Hidden Story Japan Doesn't Want You to Hear](#)

To be continued. Part 3 coming soon.

Featured image above: Japanese judiciary assuming the role of inquisitor. Illustration: ChatGPT, 2nd July 2026.

[Editor's note 1: Although Masumi Fukuda uses the name “[Unification Church](#)” and also the word “church”, please be aware that the [Unification Church](#) in Japan in 2015 changed its name to [Family Federation for World peace and Unification](#).]

[Editor's note 2: In Japan, the “**mind-control**” myth has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or “brainwash” their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The “mind-control” myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive “[deprogramming](#)” of believers – sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan's preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the [Family Federation](#). A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived “mind-control” rhetoric to explain fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan's restrictive religious climate. Overall, the “mind-control” myth functions less as a scientific or psychological concept and more as a moral panic – a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

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