

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: European Rights Experts Horrified by S Korera's Brutal Treatment of Minority Clergy

Knut Holdhus
August 7, 2026



From the press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on August 7, 2026, from left to right: Thierry Valle, president of [CAP Libert  de Conscience](#), M rk Nemes, deputy director of [CESNUR](#), Hans Noot, associate director of [HRWF](#), Michael Langhans, executive director of [FOREF](#) Germany, Massimo Introvigne, managing director of [CESNUR](#) and editor-in-chief of [Bitter Winter](#)

Press conference in Seoul: European rights groups warn of inhuman treatment of leaders of religious minorities in S Korea pointing to detention of 95 and 83-year-old



From the press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on August 7, 2026



Lee Man-hee (95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth)

A group of European human-rights and religious-freedom organizations has raised concerns about what it sees as a broader deterioration in freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression in South Korea. The group made their case at a press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on 7th August 2026, focusing particularly on the treatment of elderly religious leaders in pretrial detention and on what they regard as disproportionate measures against minority religious movements.

The press conference was organized by [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#) (HRWF) together with [CAP Libert  de Conscience](#) (CAP LC), [FOREF](#), the [Center for Studies on New Religions](#) (CESNUR) and [Bitter Winter](#), a magazine specializing in religious liberty and human-rights issues. The organizations emphasized that their concern was not to endorse the theology or teachings of any particular religious movement. Rather, they said, the fundamental issue was whether South Korea is applying its constitutional and international human-rights commitments equally to religious minorities and their leaders.

Focus on the detention of Lee Man-hee

In the [press release](#) issued after the Seoul press conference, it was pointed out that one of the central issues was the detention of 95-year-old Lee Man-hee (이만희), chairman of Shincheonji Church of Jesus [See editor's note below], a South Korean Christian movement that has experienced considerable persecution since its establishment in 1984. Lee is currently being held in pretrial detention in connection with allegations concerning political activities and elections.

The organizations questioned whether imprisonment before trial is necessary or proportionate in the case of someone of Lee's advanced age, particularly when the alleged offences are non-violent. They called on South Korean authorities to reconsider his detention and to examine whether less restrictive measures could achieve the same legitimate legal objectives.

The issue is particularly significant because pretrial detention is not itself a finding of guilt. Under the presumption of innocence, a person awaiting trial is legally considered innocent unless and until a court establishes guilt. The speakers argued that this principle should be applied especially carefully when the accused is elderly and potentially vulnerable.



Thierry Valle at the Seoul press conference on August 7, 2026

Thierry Valle, president of [CAP Liberté de Conscience](#), pointed to South Korea's international commitments. The country ratified the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) in 1990 and the [Convention against Torture](#) (UNCAT) in 1995. Valle questioned whether placing a 95-year-old religious leader in prison before trial is compatible with the principles of human dignity, proportionality and humane treatment embodied in those international instruments.

He referred to cases elsewhere in Asia in which elderly religious figures were subjected to less restrictive measures. Among his examples were Cardinal Joseph Zen, who was released on bail in Hong Kong in 2022, and the Vietnamese Buddhist leader Thich Quang Do, who was placed under house arrest rather than imprisoned.

Hak Ja Han also mentioned

The conference also referred to the case of 83-year-old [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), president of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), often known in South Korea as [Unificationism](#) (통일교). She is currently facing criminal proceedings in South Korea in a separate investigation involving allegations of unlawful political activities and other offences.

The organizations did not argue that elderly religious leaders should be exempt from criminal investigation or prosecution. Their argument was instead that age, health, the presumption of innocence and the availability of alternative measures should be taken seriously when authorities decide whether detention before trial is justified.

Hans Noot, associate director of [HRWF](#), said the question extended beyond the two individual cases. In his view, democratic societies are tested by how they treat unpopular or controversial minorities. He warned that when religious groups become stigmatized, peaceful religious activity is restricted, or dissent is regarded as something that must be controlled, the consequences can affect society more broadly.



Michael Langhans at the Seoul press conference on August 7, 2026

Questions about the Shincheonji investigation

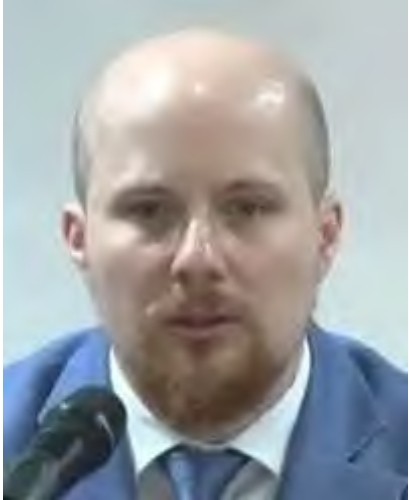
Michael Langhans, executive director of [FOREF](#) Germany, presented a legal analysis of Lee's detention. He questioned whether continued pretrial imprisonment was necessary if prosecutors already possessed sufficient evidence to bring the case to trial.

He also raised a different but related concern: whether the investigation has been conducted from a genuinely neutral standpoint. In particular, he questioned whether descriptions of Shincheonji [See editor's note below] as a "sect" or "cult" could influence the way allegations against the organization are interpreted.

This distinction matters because South Korea has a

constitutional commitment to religious freedom. A government may investigate alleged criminal conduct by members of a religious organization, but, according to the organizations represented at the conference, the religious identity of those involved should not itself become a reason for heightened suspicion or harsher treatment.

Langhans therefore framed the Shincheonji [See editor's note below] case as a question that extends beyond one religious movement: How can governments enforce laws designed to protect democratic elections while ensuring that such laws do not unnecessarily interfere with freedom of religion and association?



Dr. Márk Nemes at Seoul press conference Aug. 7, 2026



Dr. Massimo Introvigne at the Seoul press conference on August 7, 2026



Pastor Son Hyun-bo, here August 2025

Concern about international repercussions

Márk Nemes, deputy director of [CESNUR](#), emphasized that Shincheonji [See editor's note below] should not be viewed merely as a controversial South Korean church. It has developed into an international religious movement with congregations in numerous countries.

According to Nemes, recent academic investigations in Shincheonji [See editor's note below] congregations in Europe, Argentina and Australia have indicated increasing hostility toward the movement. He argued that developments in South Korea could therefore have consequences beyond the country's borders. Members of the movement living elsewhere also possess rights to practice and express their religion under international human-rights law, particularly Articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR.

Massimo Introvigne, managing director of [CESNUR](#) and editor-in-chief of [Bitter Winter](#), described Lee's imprisonment as a troubling development. He argued that international standards concerning the treatment of prisoners, including the UN Nelson Mandela Rules, point toward considering alternatives to imprisonment for extremely elderly detainees accused of non-violent offences.

Introvigne also questioned whether the allegations against Shincheonji [See editor's note below] members relating to political participation had been interpreted too broadly, describing the charges as potentially "legally and conceptually overstretched."

Other religious-freedom concerns

The speakers stressed that the Shincheonji [See editor's note below] case was only one element of a larger picture. HRWF referred to continuing concerns surrounding Segyero Church (세계로교회) in Busan, where Pastor Márk Nemes Son Hyun-bo (손현보) reportedly faced official scrutiny even after his release from detention.

The [press release](#) also mentioned several other contentious issues: conscientious objection to military service, opposition to the construction of a mosque in Daegu, and questions concerning religious accommodation in schools.

[HRWF](#) has for decades documented the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse military service on conscientious grounds. South Korea eventually introduced an alternative civilian-service system, but critics have argued that the alternative remains excessively punitive because it lasts 36 months - twice the length of ordinary military service. South Korean courts have nevertheless upheld important aspects of the system against constitutional challenges.

At the conclusion of the conference, the participating scholars signed an official letter calling on the

South Korean government to release Lee Man-hee (이만희) immediately. The organizations said they would continue documenting the cases and urged South Korean authorities, the media and the international community to examine them through the principles of due process, proportionality, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and equal protection under the law.

The central message of the conference was therefore broader than the fate of one elderly religious leader. [HRWF](#) and its partner organizations argue that the treatment of controversial or unpopular religious minorities provides an important test of South Korea's commitment to the democratic and human-rights principles it has pledged to uphold.

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. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the Book of Revelation are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

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SOUTH KOREA/한국: EU rights groups raise alarm over freedom of religion and expression

Freedom of Religion and Belief

SOUTH KOREA: European rights groups raise alarm in Seoul over freedom of religion and expression

국제 인권단체들, 한국의 종교의 자유 및 표현의 자유에 우려 표명

Press release issued after a press conference at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club



Video

HRWF (07.08.2026) — Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), together with CAP Libert  de Conscience (CAP LC), which has accredited ECOSOC status at the United Nations, FOREF, CESNUR and Bitter Winter, held a press conference today at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on “Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression in South Korea.”

HRWF (2026 년 8 월 7 일 , 대한민국, 서울) — 국경없는인권(HRWF)은 유엔 경제사회이사회(ECOSOC) 특별협의지위를 보유한 양심의자유연합(CAP LC), 유럽종교자유포럼(FOREF), 그리고 신종교연구센터(CESNUR)/비터윈터(Bitter Winter)와 함께 오늘 서울 외신기자클럽에서 대한민국의 종교 및 신념의 자유와 표현의 자유를 주제로 기자회견을 개최했다. ([페이지 아래에서 더 읽어보세요](#))

The issues addressed included concerns about the treatment of elderly religious leaders in pretrial detention, including questions of proportionality, humanitarian considerations, and due process.

The organizations called on South Korean authorities to review the detention of 95-year-old Shincheonji Chairman Lee Man-hee and to ensure that the legal and administrative response to religious minorities remains neutral, proportionate, and consistent with South Korea’s international human-rights obligations, including with respect to 83-year-old Mrs. Hak-ja Han Moon of the Family Federation.

The issues discussed today form part of a broader pattern of Freedom of Religion or Belief concerns in South Korea. Concerns have also persisted regarding Segero Church in Busan, which has reportedly continued to face harassment and official scrutiny even after Pastor Son Hyun-bo was released from detention.

Reporting has also raised questions about conscientious objection, public hostility toward a mosque project in Daegu, and religious accommodation in educational settings.

Over the past decades, HRWF has documented the imprisonment of hundreds of Jehovah’s Witnesses in South Korea as conscientious objectors. Although alternative civilian service was later introduced, critics maintain that it has been implemented in a punitive manner rather than as a genuine rights-respecting alternative.

It is indeed to be noted that the alternative civilian service lasts 36 months, twice the length of regular military service. Recent court decisions have also upheld key features of that system against constitutional challenge.

Opening the conference, **Hans Noot, Associate Director of HRWF**, said the issues at stake “lie at the heart of democratic society,” warning that when religious communities are stigmatized, peaceful gatherings are restricted, and dissent is treated as a problem to be contained, the consequences “extend far beyond any single group or case.”

He said the conference was not about defending any one theology or movement, but

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about “defending a principle: that fundamental rights apply equally to all.”

Thierry Valle, President of CAP Liberté de Conscience, addressed the legality of Chairman Lee’s detention under international law. Referring to South Korea’s ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1990 and the Convention against Torture in 1995, he questioned whether placing a 95-year-old in pretrial detention is consistent with those obligations.

He stressed that the presumption of innocence must prevail over any presumption of guilt.

There are alternative more proportionate and more humane measures respecting the presumption of innocence and human dignity in democratic countries. And he cited precedents including Cardinal Joseph Zen’s 2022 release on bail in Hong Kong and Vietnam’s decision to place Buddhist Patriarch Thich Quang Do under house arrest rather than in prison.

Michael Langhans, Executive Director of FOREF Germany, presented a legal analysis questioning whether pretrial detention for Chairman Lee of the Shincheonji Church was necessary given evidence already sufficient for an indictment. And he wondered whether that evidence was gathered neutrally rather than through a narrative framing the defendant’s community as a “sect” or “cult.”

He argued that the case raises a broader question for lawmakers: whether measures meant to protect fair elections can be applied without nullifying the constitutionally and internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion.

Márk Nemes, Deputy Director of CESNUR, shared his thoughts on the effects of ongoing persecution and its possible ramifications for minority faiths. He noted three recent scholarly investigations conducted in selected Shincheonji congregations in Europe, Argentina, and Australia, each finding worrisome increase in hostility toward the otherwise peaceful and cooperative religious movement.

He stressed that Shincheonji is not simply a South Korean minority church but a global religious movement with congregations worldwide. The disproportionate persecution in South Korea affects the lives of those congregants abroad, whose freedoms for expressing and practicing faith, enshrined in ICCPR Articles 18 and 19, are inalienable rights and must be considered during this current process.

Massimo Introvigne, Managing Director of CESNUR and Editor-in-Chief of Bitter Winter, said South Korea “has crossed a worrying line” by arresting Chairman Lee, arguing that international standards such as the Mandela Rules would call for house arrest rather than imprisonment for a 95-year-old accused of a non-violent offence.

He said the charges, tied to ordinary political participation by members of a religious minority, “appear legally and conceptually overstretched,” and warned that the case fits a broader pattern of pressure against minority faiths in the country.

The organizations called on South Korean authorities, the media, and the international community to examine these developments with close attention to due process, proportionality, and the equal protection of fundamental rights, and made further documentation available to support continued reporting.

At the conclusion of the press conference, the scholars in attendance signed an official letter calling on the Government of the Republic of Korea to immediately release Chairman Lee from custody.



Hans Noot (HRWF)

Media Contact in English or in Korean

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

VIDEO:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b305bVcYTuUq7xbZ2JfmcPe6jxhok3Pw/view>

국제 인권단체들, 한국의 종교의 자유 및 표현의 자유에 우려 표명

HRWF (2026 년 8 월 7 일, 대한민국, 서울) — 국경없는인권(HRWF)은 유엔 경제사회이사회(ECOSOC) 특별협의지위를 보유한

양심의자유연합(CAP LC), 유럽종교자유포럼(FOREF), 그리고 신종교연구센터(CESNUR)/비터윈터(Bitter Winter)와

함께 오늘 서울외신기자클럽에서 대한민국의 종교 및 신념의 자유와 표현의 자유를 주제로 기자회견을 개최했다.

이날 다뤄진 사안에는 비례성 원칙, 인도적 고려, 적법절차 문제를 포함해 고령의 종교 지도자들에 대한 구속 수감

처우에 관한 우려가 포함되었다. 참가 단체들은 한국 당국에 95 세의 신천지 이만희 총회장에 대한 구속을 재검토할

것과, 종교적 소수자에 대한 법적·행정적 대응이 중립적이고 비례적이며 한국의 국제 인권 의무에 부합하도록 할

것을 촉구했다. 여기에는 83 세인 세계평화통일가정연합의 한학자 여사에 관한 사안도 포함된다.

오늘 논의된 사안들은 한국 내 종교·신념의 자유에 관한 보다 광범위한 우려의 일부이다. 부산 세계로교회와 관련한

우려도 계속되고 있는데, 손현보 목사가 구속에서 석방된 이후에도 이 교회는 괴롭힘과 당국의 감시를 계속 받고

있는 것으로 알려졌다.

보도를 통해서도 그동안 양심적 병역거부, 대구 모스크 건립 사업에 대한 대중의 반발, 그리고 교육 현장에서의

종교적 배려 문제가 지적돼 왔다. HRWF 는 지난 수십 년간 한국에서 양심적 병역거부를 이유로 수백 명의 여호와의

증인 신도가 수감된 사실을 기록해왔다. 이후 대체복무제가 도입되긴 했지만, 비판론자들은 이 제도가 진정한 권리

존중형 대안이라기보다 징벌적 성격을 띠고 있다고 지적한다. 특히 복무 기간이 일반 병역의 두 배인 36 개월에

달하고, 교정시설에서 근무해야 한다는 점이 근거로 꼽힌다. 최근 법원 판결에서도 이 제도의 핵심 조항들이 위헌

소송에서 합헌으로 유지된 바 있다.

기자회견을 시작하며 HRWF 의 한스 누트 공동 대표는 이번 사안이 “민주사회의 핵심 가치와 직결된 문제”라고

말했다. 그는 종교 공동체가 부정적으로 낙인찍히고, 평화로운 집회가 제한되며, 다른 의견을 가진 사람들을

통제해야 할 문제로 취급하기 시작하면 그 영향은 “어느 한 단체나 사건에만 머물지 않고 사회 전체로 확대될 수

있다”고 경고했다. 또한 이번 기자회견의 목적은 특정 교리나 종교단체를 옹호하는 데 있는 것이 아니라, “기본권은

누구에게나 동등하게 적용되어야 한다는 원칙을 지키기 위한 것”이라고 강조했다.

양심의자유연합(CAP LC)의 티에리 발(Thierry Valle) 회장은 국제법상 이만희 총회장 구속의 적법성 문제를 제기했다.

그는 한국이 1990 년 시민적·정치적 권리에 관한 국제규약(자유권규약)과 1995 년 고문방지협약을 비준한 사실을

언급하며, 95 세 초고령자를 재판 전에 구속하는 것이 이러한 국제적 의무에 부합하는지 의문을 제기했다. 그는

무죄추정의 원칙이 유죄추정보다 우선해야 한다고 강조했다.

민주주의 국가에는 무죄추정의 원칙과 인간의 존엄성을 지키면서도 더 비례적이고 인도적인 대안적 조치들이 있다.

그는 그 사례로 2022 년 홍콩에서 조지프 켄 추기경이 보석으로 석방된 사례와, 베트남이 티판드 스티오 스가 대시

가택연금 조치한 사례를 들었다.

유럽종교자유포럼 독일(FOREF GERMANY)의 미하엘 랑한스(Michael Langhans) 이사는 법률 분석을 통해, 기소에

충분한 증거가 이미 확보된 상황에서 신천지 이만희 총회장에 대한 구속 수감이 과연 필요했는지, 그리고 그 증거가

피고인의 공동체를 “이단”이나 “사이비”로 규정하는 서사를 통해서가 아니라 중립적으로 수집된 것인지에 의문을

제기했다. 그는 이 사건이 입법자들에게 보다 근본적인 질문을 던진다고 주장했다. 공정한 선거를 보호하기 위해

마련된 조치들이, 헌법과 국제법이 보장하는 종교의 자유를 사실상 무력화하지 않으면서도 적용될 수 있는가 하는

문제라고 말했다.

마크 네메시(Márk Nemes) CESNUR 부소장은 소수 종교에 대한 지속적인 박해가 어떤 결과를 초래할 수 있는지

설명했다. 그는 유럽과 아르헨티나, 호주의 신천지 교회를 각각 대상으로 최근 실시된 세 건의 학술 연구를 언급했다.

Page 2세 학술 연구 모두 평화적이고 협조적인 성격의 이 종교 단체에 대한 적대적 인식과 반감이 우려할 만한 수준으로

확산되고 있다는 있다는 결과를 확인했다. 그는 신천지가 단순한 한국의 소수 종교가 아니라 전 세계에 신도를 둔

국제적인 종교 운동이라는 점을 강조했다. 한국에서의 지나친 박해는 해외 신도들의 삶에도 영향을 미친다고

지적했다. 아울러 해외 신도들도 자유권규약(ICCPR) 제 18 조와 제 19 조에 따라 자신의 신앙을 표현하고 실천할

자유를 보장받고 있는 만큼, 이번 사건을 판단할 때 이들의 권리도 반드시 고려해야 한다고 말했다.

신종교연구센터(CESNUR)의 마시모 인트로비네(Massimo Introvigne) 대표이자 비터윈터 편집장은 이만희 총회장을

구속함으로써 한국이 “우려스러운 선을 넘었다”고 말했다. 그는 만델라 규칙과 같은 국제 기준에 따르면 비폭력

혐의를 받는 95 세 초고령자에게는 수감이 아닌 가택연금이 적용되어야 한다고 주장했다. 그는 종교적 소수자

구성원들의 통상적인 정치 참여와 관련된 이번 혐의가 “법리적으로도 개념적으로도 지나치게 확대 해석된 것으로

보인다”고 말하고, 이번 사건이 한국 내 소수 종교에 대한 압박이라는 보다 광범위한 패턴에 부합한다고 경고했다.

참가 단체들은 한국 당국과 언론, 국제사회에 적법절차와 비례성 원칙, 그리고 기본권의 평등한 보호에 각별한

주의를 기울여 이러한 상황을 검토해 줄 것을 촉구했으며, 향후 취재를 지원하기 위한 추가 자료도 제공했다.

기자회견을 마치며, 참석한 학자들은 대한민국 정부에 이만희 총회장을 즉각 석방할 것을 촉구하는 공식 서한에

서명하였다.





Hans Noot (HRWF)

언론 문의

국경없는인권(Human Rights Without Frontiers, HRWF)

intern1@hrwf.org

VIDEO:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b305bVcYTUq7xbZ2JfmcPe6jxhok3Pw/view>

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witness



Yoon Yeong-ho, former director general of the international headquarters of the Family Federation, here 11th February 2022. Screenshot from live transmission by FFWPU

As South Korea awaits a closely watched court ruling at the end of August, lawyers for Family Federation President Hak Ja Han (한학자) have launched a detailed attack on the credibility of the prosecution’s most important witness. They argue that the testimony of former Federation executive Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) is contradicted by documents, access records, diaries, and the timeline of events, making it too unreliable to support a conviction.

See also Religious Freedom in S Korea: European Concern

The case has attracted national attention not only because it involves the leader of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification – often referred to in South Korea as Unificationism (통일교) – but also because it forms part of a much broader investigation into allegations of improper political influence during the administration of former President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열).

Unlike ordinary criminal cases, this investigation is being conducted by a special prosecutor. In South Korea, a special prosecutor is appointed to investigate politically sensitive matters where the regular prosecution service may be perceived as having conflicts of interest or insufficient independence. The current investigation, headed by Special Prosecutor Min Joong-ki (민중기), has focused heavily on allegations involving former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희) and people accused of seeking political favors through gifts or other benefits.

Prosecutors allege that senior Family Federation officials attempted to influence government figures by providing expensive luxury goods and illegal political donations. Hak Ja Han (한학자) – also called Mother Han – herself denies wrongdoing, and her lawyers argue that the investigation has gone beyond its lawful scope while relying on unreliable evidence. The Seoul Central District Court is expected to deliver its first-instance verdict on 31st August.

문화일보

Logo of Munhwa Ilbo, a conservative newspaper and South Korea’s only national evening daily, ranking among the top ten dailies by circulation.

Writing in the conservative daily Munhwa Ilbo (문화일보) on 5th August, reporter Hwang Hye-

jin (황혜진) summarizes the defense’s final arguments before the court reaches its decision.

The article notes that much of the prosecution’s case rests on the testimony of Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호), the former Director-General of the Family Federation’s World Headquarters. According to the special prosecutor, Yoon acted under Mother Han’s instructions when he allegedly delivered an illegal political contribution of 100 million won (in 2022



Former People Power Party



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of 100 million won (in 2022 ca. US\$ 77,000) to former *People Power Party* lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동). Prosecutors also allege that luxury gifts were presented to former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희) in connection with requests concerning matters affecting the [Family Federation](#).

lawmaker **Kweon Seong-dong** (권성동), here 23rd Dec. 2024. Photo: 국민의힘TV / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 3.0 Unp](#). Cropped

Because [Yoon](#) has provided detailed testimony about these events, the court’s assessment of whether his statements are credible may prove decisive in determining the outcome of the trial.

[Hak Ja Han](#)’s legal team, however, devoted much of its closing arguments to attacking that credibility. Rather than disputing only individual allegations, the defense argued that the entire prosecution case is built upon testimony that repeatedly conflicts with objective evidence.

The defense first challenged the legality of the investigation itself. According to [Mother Han](#)’s lawyers, the special prosecutor expanded the inquiry beyond its legally authorized mandate by investigating what they describe as conduct that, if criminal at all, involved [Yoon](#) personally rather than [Hak Ja Han](#) herself. They also argued that nearly half of the approximately 3,400 items of evidence submitted by prosecutors were obtained unlawfully and therefore should not be admitted by the court.

The strongest criticism, however, was directed at [Yoon](#)’s testimony.

According to the defense, [Yoon](#) claimed that after delivering 100 million won (in 2022 ca. US\$ 77,000) to former lawmaker Kweon in January 2022, he reported the transaction to [Hak Ja Han](#). Prosecutors presented a written report as evidence supporting that account. The defense responded that the document’s actual creation date was January 2023 rather than January 2022. They argued that this discrepancy undermines the prosecution’s narrative and suggests investigators shaped their questioning to fit a predetermined conclusion.

According to the [Munhwa Ilbo](#) article, [Mother Han](#)’s lawyers further maintained that [Yoon](#) repeatedly changed his story during the investigation.



One of the sacred sites of the [Family Federation](#) – the Cheon Jeong Temple in Gapyeong, South Korea. The building houses a museum in honor of the life of the [True Parents](#). Photo: FFWPU

One disputed episode concerns [Yoon](#)’s claim that former lawmaker Kweon asked him to convey a message of gratitude to [Mother Han](#) shortly after the presidential election. The defense argued that neither [Yoon](#)’s personal diary nor his special reports contain any mention of such a meeting. Moreover, they said that records showing when [Yoon](#) entered the Cheon Jeong Temple – the [Family Federation](#)’s headquarters – and the wake-up times recorded in his diary contradict his claim that he met [Mother Han](#) between seven and eight o’clock that morning.

The lawyers also challenged [Yoon](#)'s testimony regarding a planned visit to then President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol. According to the defense, [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) had previously acknowledged that he had not informed [Mother Han](#) in advance about the meeting and only told her afterward, when she reportedly expressed surprise. That earlier statement, they argued, directly contradicts his later testimony that she had been informed beforehand.

Another major point of disagreement involves luxury gifts allegedly intended for former First Lady Kim Keon-hee ([김건희](#)).

The defense argued that [Yoon Yeong-ho](#)'s description of how a Chanel handbag was selected changed several times during the investigation. During his first questioning by prosecutors, he reportedly said that [Mother Han](#) herself chose the handbag. During a later interview, he instead said that he and another associate selected it before presenting the idea to her. Still later, during questioning by the special prosecutor, he claimed that he had even reported the precise model of handbag to [Mother Han](#). According to the defense, these changing accounts cast doubt on his reliability.

[Hak Ja Han](#)'s lawyers also disputed [Yoon](#)'s testimony concerning a Graff necklace. Yoon claimed that he purchased the necklace in July 2022 on [Mother Han](#)'s instructions. The defense responded that public controversy surrounding the necklace did not emerge until the end of August 2022. Because of that chronology, they argued that his account could not be accurate.

In concluding their arguments, [Mother Han](#)'s legal team emphasized that she served as the [movement](#)'s religious leader rather than its day-to-day administrator. They argued that administrative affairs and financial decisions were managed by [Yoon](#) himself and urged the court to allow the 83-year-old defendant to continue defending herself while remaining out of detention.

[Munhwa Ilbo](#) presents the defense's arguments in considerable detail, highlighting the numerous inconsistencies that [Mother Han](#)'s lawyers say undermine the prosecution's principal witness. Whether the judges ultimately find those inconsistencies significant enough to reject [Yoon Yeong-ho](#)'s testimony – or conclude that it remains credible despite the defense's objections – will likely be one of the central questions when the *Seoul Central District Court* announces its verdict on 31st August.

See also [Religious Freedom in S Korea: European Concern](#)

Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: Court documents versus witness testimony. Illustration: ChatGPT, 6th August 2026.

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