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Knut Holdhus  
August 26, 2026



Slammed for 'political retaliation', special prosecutors refuse to end the case after a 180-day probe yields no evidence



Alleged police intelligence leak. Illustration: ChatGPT

A new dispute has emerged over the final handling of one of the unresolved cases investigated by South Korea's second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team, this time involving allegations that senior police officials deliberately suppressed an investigation into alleged overseas gambling by leaders of [Unificationism](#) (통일교), also known as the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#).

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The controversy centres on Yoon Hee-keun (윤희근), a former Commissioner General of the National Police Agency, who was himself investigated by the special prosecutor. Following the team's decision to

transfer the unresolved case to the police for further handling, Yoon has accused the special prosecutor of failing to find evidence sufficient for prosecution and of using the investigation for political purposes.

**What was the special prosecutor investigating?**

The case concerns allegations dating back to the period when Yoon served in the senior leadership of the National Police Agency. According to South Korean media reports, police received intelligence concerning alleged overseas gambling by senior [Unificationism](#) figures, including [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), the leader of the [religious organization](#). The alleged gambling took place at casinos in Las Vegas between roughly 2008 and 2011/2012, although the media reports differ slightly on the precise period. As a large number of media outlets reported, the special prosecutors claim that the amount involved was around 60 billion won, or approximately US\$40-45 million at current exchange rates.

The special prosecutor's investigation focused not simply on whether the gambling had occurred, but on whether senior police officials had deliberately suppressed the investigation after receiving the intelligence. There were also allegations that confidential investigative information had been leaked to [Unificationism](#).



*BBS News, the news division of the Buddhist Broadcasting System (BBS), a major religious, non-profit public media network in South Korea, dedicated to Buddhism, operating alongside other major religious outlets like the Christian Broadcasting System (CBS)*



*iNews24, a prominent South Korean online newspaper*

According to [BBS News](#), the news division of the Buddhist Broadcasting System (BBS), the special prosecutor suspected Yoon of both covering up the alleged gambling and leaking investigative secrets. [BBS reports](#) on 26th August that the team conducted two searches and interrogated suspects but ultimately failed to obtain evidence sufficient to establish criminal charges.

[iNews24](#) (아이뉴스24), a prominent online newspaper, similarly reports that Yoon was suspected of having received intelligence about the alleged gambling while serving as Deputy Commissioner General and Commissioner General in 2022 and then, allegedly following instructions from former President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열), having the investigation suppressed. The outlet adds that the special prosecutor also suspected him of passing the intelligence to [Unificationism](#). These remain allegations investigated by the special prosecutor, not established findings against Yoon Hee-keun (윤희근).

**The special prosecutor does not indict Yoon**

The second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team concluded its 180-day investigative mandate on 24th August. According to [iNews24](#), it indicted 58 people in connection with cases arising from its broader investigation, including former President Yoon

Suk-yeol (윤석열), former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), former military officers and former prosecutors.

But Yoon Hee-keun (윤희근) was not among those indicted. Instead, according to iNews24, 46 unresolved cases involving 150 suspects were transferred to the National Office of Investigation (NOI) within the National Police Agency.



*Yonhap News, South Korea's designated public news agency and the country's largest wire service.*

The NOI is essentially the investigative arm of South Korea's national police. This creates an obvious point of contention for Yoon: the agency to which his case has now been transferred is part of the same police organization that he once headed.

That is why, as reported by [Yonhap News](#), Yoon sarcastically asked whether the conclusion of 180 days of special-prosecutor

investigation was simply to send the case back to what he described as his "former home", the National Office of Investigation.

**Yoon: "If you cannot indict me, close the case"**

Yoon's central argument, reported consistently by many media outlets, is that the special prosecutor should either produce evidence and prosecute him or formally close the case, rather than transferring the

unresolved matter to the police.

[Yonhap News](#) quotes him as describing the allegations against him as "utterly absurd" and insisting that there was no possibility that he and the police investigative leadership had collectively carried out such an operation.



According to [News1](#), Yoon went even further, describing the allegations as a "groundless fantasy" and accusing the special prosecutor of having found neither evidence nor prosecutable charges. He argued that if an investigation fails to establish criminal wrongdoing, the proper procedure is to explain the result and close the matter without indictment.

He particularly objected to the manner in which the case was transferred. [News1](#) quotes him as asking whether it was really

characteristic of the Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team to quietly slip away "without so much as an expression of regret or an apology".

[BBS News](#) highlights a similar point. Yoon argued that after 180 days of investigation, including two extensions of the investigative period and a further extension made possible through a legal amendment, the special prosecutor had failed to obtain evidence, witness testimony or statements from related individuals sufficient to prosecute him.

**Political retaliation?**



The dispute has also acquired a distinctly political dimension. Yoon served as National Police Commissioner under the previous conservative administration. He therefore suggested that the investigation may have been motivated, at least partly, by the fact that he had held a senior position under the former government.

[Yonhap News](#) reports him as demanding an explanation as to whether the investigation had effectively been conducted on an "investigate first, find out later" basis simply because he had been police chief under the previous administration.

All four reports also note Yoon's accusation that the Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration and the Democratic Party have been using special prosecutors as a means of political retaliation. He questioned how long the government intended to use what he called the "political retaliation special prosecutor" as a political weapon.

**Yoon's political future**

[News1](#) and BBS News give particular attention to another aspect of the press conference: Yoon's possible return to politics.

Yoon has reportedly been mentioned as a possible candidate for the vacant People Power Party organization leadership in the Cheongju Seowon district and as a potential candidate in a future

parliamentary election.

Thus, the four reports portray the 26th August press conference as more than simply a former police chief's response to an investigative decision. [Yonhap](#) and [iNews24](#) focus primarily on the unresolved legal case; [News1](#) gives greater attention to Yoon's accusations that the special prosecutor failed to substantiate its allegations; and [BBS News](#) additionally highlights his possible political comeback.

At the centre of the dispute, however, is a relatively straightforward question: after six months of investigation, if the special prosecutor could not establish a prosecutable case against Yoon Hee-keun, why was the unresolved case transferred to the very police organization that he once led? Yoon argues that the special prosecutor should have answered that question itself rather than leaving it to the National Office of Investigation.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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# S Korea's Special Prosecutors: A Political Tool?

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New Cases

Becoming a tool used by the governing party against its political opponents: A system of special prosecutors created to guarantee impartial investigations



Aggressively promoting special prosecutor investigations: **Lee Jae-myung**, President of South Korea since 4<sup>th</sup> June 2025. Here on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2025, at the Hilton Hotel in Gyeongju, South Korea. Official White House Photo by Molly Riley. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

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Protesters clashed with Korean soldiers 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2024 when martial law was declared. Photo: [서울의소리 VoiceOfSeoul](#) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 3.0 Unp](#)

The [editorial](#) was published immediately after the conclusion of the **180-day investigation by the so-called Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team**. This investigation was established to examine allegations left unresolved by three earlier special prosecutor investigations focusing on controversies surrounding the administration of

A **세계일보**  
The logo of the [Segye Ilbo](#)

recent [editorial](#) in the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) has sharply criticized what it sees as the growing politicization of the country's **special prosecutor system** under President Lee Jae-myung (이재명). Published on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2026, the [editorial](#) argues that a mechanism originally created to guarantee impartial investigations in politically sensitive cases has increasingly become, in the newspaper's view, a tool that can be used by the governing party against its



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former President Yoon Suk Yeol (윤석열). These included the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2024 martial-law episode, allegations involving former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), and the controversy surrounding the death of a Marine Corps conscript.

Rather than regarding the latest investigation as a successful completion of that process, *Segye Ilbo* portrays its outcome as evidence of a system that has become increasingly open-ended. The special prosecutor's team reportedly transferred **46 unresolved cases to the police** when its six-month mandate expired. **One of those unresolved cases** concerned alleged suppression of a police investigation involving the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* – in Korea often referred to simply as *Unificationism* (통일교). That particular part of the investigation was principally into the handling of police intelligence and possible suppression/leakage of an investigation concerning *Family Federation* leaders.

The *Family Federation* case here provides a concrete example of the broader issue discussed by *Segye Ilbo*: **the Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team investigated the matter for six months, but ultimately handed it to another investigative body without resolving it.** That is precisely the kind of institutional continuity and potentially open-ended investigation that the *editorial* is questioning.

Special Prosecutor Kweon Chang-yeong (권창영) defended the decision to transfer the matter to the *National Police Agency's National Office of Investigation* (국가수사본부) for further investigation by saying that some matters could not realistically be resolved within six months. He also suggested that investigations should continue through a permanent **Special Investigation Headquarters**.

For *Segye Ilbo*, however, this raises a fundamental question: **If special prosecutor investigations can simply be followed by new special prosecutor investigations or permanent investigative bodies, where does the process end?** The *editorial* asks rhetorically whether South Korea is heading toward a situation in which special prosecutors continue operating throughout the entire term of current President Lee Jae-myung (이재명), which ends in June 2030.

### Why does South Korea have special prosecutors?

To understand the *newspaper's* criticism, some background about South Korea's special prosecutor system is necessary.

The system was introduced in **1999, during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung** (김대중). Its purpose was to provide an alternative mechanism for investigating politically sensitive cases in situations where there could be doubts about the impartiality of the ordinary prosecution service. At the time, one case involved a sitting senior prosecutor, while another involved one of President Kim's close associates. Both the governing and opposition parties agreed that it could be difficult to expect the regular



President of South Korea Kim Dae-jung, here on 27<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2001. Photo: [www.kremlin.ru/](http://www.kremlin.ru/) / ITAR-TASS / Sergei Velichkin, Vladimir Rodionov. License: [CC Attr 4.0](#)

prosecution service to investigate such cases impartially.

A special prosecutor is therefore intended to operate at a certain distance from the ordinary political and prosecutorial establishment. In principle, the system is designed to provide **independence from political power and neutrality between competing political forces**.

*Segye Ilbo* argues that this original rationale has gradually been undermined. According to the *editorial*, successive special prosecutor investigations have acquired increasingly broad powers and larger organizational structures, while the safeguards intended to guarantee political neutrality have become weaker.

The *newspaper* regards the latest special prosecutor investigation as a particularly clear example.



#### A partisan process?

The *editorial*'s principal criticism concerns the political circumstances in which the *Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team* was established.

The bill creating it was pushed through the National



Logo of the People Power Party

**국민의힘**  
PEOPLE POWER PARTY

Assembly by the **Democratic Party of Korea** (DPK – 민주당), which currently dominates South Korean politics, together with other parties supporting President Lee's government. The opposition **People Power Party** (PPP – 국민의힘) opposed the legislation.

The *editorial* also objects to the arrangement for selecting the special prosecutor. It says that the right to recommend candidates was divided between the Democratic Party and the **National Innovation Party** (조국혁신당), which is politically aligned with the current government, while the PPP was excluded.



The logo of the National Innovation Party

From *Segye Ilbo*'s perspective, this is a fundamental problem. If the governing political forces can establish a special

prosecutor and control the process by which candidates are recommended, the newspaper argues, it becomes difficult to regard the resulting investigation as politically independent.

The *editorial* goes further, alleging that individuals connected with the investigation appeared on YouTube programs sympathetic to the



government and expressed hostility toward former President Yoon and the PPP. It also criticizes what it describes as attempts to portray supporters of Yoon as supporters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2024 martial-law declaration.

These claims form part of the editorial's broader argument that the special prosecutor system has moved away from its original purpose and increasingly resembles an instrument of political conflict.



**Former President Yoon Suk-yeol** of the Republic of Korea 25<sup>th</sup> April 2023, in Maryland, USA. Photo: NASA/Aubrey Gemignani. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

### A rapidly expanding system

The [editorial](#) places the current controversy in a wider context. Since President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) took office, **five special prosecutor teams have reportedly completed investigations**, while a sixth was preparing to investigate alleged irregularities involving the 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2026 local elections.

At the same time, the Democratic Party is preparing legislation for another special prosecutor investigation concerning allegations of what has been termed **"fabricated prosecutions"**. This proposal would target investigators involved in criminal cases in which President Lee himself has been implicated.

For [Segye Ilbo](#), this creates an especially striking contradiction.

The Democratic Party has strongly promoted the principle of **separating investigation from prosecution**, a reform intended to reduce or eliminate prosecutors' traditional investigative powers. Yet, according to the [editorial](#), the party simultaneously supports special prosecutors who possess both **investigative and prosecutorial authority**.

The [newspaper](#) therefore questions whether the stated institutional principle is being applied consistently.

Ultimately, the [editorial](#) is not simply objecting to one particular investigation. Its broader argument is that **South Korea's special prosecutor system risks losing the independence and political neutrality that originally justified its existence**. In [Segye Ilbo's](#) interpretation, what was initially designed as an exceptional safeguard for cases in which ordinary investigations could not be trusted has increasingly become a routine feature of political struggles.

The [editorial's](#) central warning is consequently about more than the fate of former President Yoon or the current government. It asks whether South Korea is allowing an extraordinary investigative mechanism to become a **permanent instrument of political accountability – and, potentially, political retaliation**.

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**Text.** Knut Holdhus, editor

**Featured image** above: Justice caught between politics.

Illustration: ChatGPT, August 2026, edited.

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