

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Responsibility Must Be Proven in Appeal Court

Knut Holdhus
September 3, 2026



The key issue for the appeal court is whether responsibility for specific unlawful acts can be attributed personally to Mother Han

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Hours after the Seoul Central District Court sentenced [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), leader of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), to [two years in prison](#), [Segye Ilbo](#) religious affairs correspondent [Jeong Seong-su](#) (정성수) raises a broader question: what exactly should the appellate court be weighing when it reviews the case?

In his 31st August column, "[13-Year Demand, 2-Year Sentence: The Balance of the Appeal](#)", Jeong does not simply argue that [Hak Ja Han](#) - also called [Mother Han](#) - should be acquitted. His central concern is more fundamental. He questions whether the enormous gap between the 13-year sentence requested by the special prosecutor and the [two-year sentence](#) actually imposed by the court reveals that the prosecution initially portrayed the case as considerably more serious than what the evidence ultimately established.

More importantly, [Jeong](#) argues that the appeal should not be determined by political considerations, the reputation of the special prosecutor, or public attitudes toward the [Family Federation](#). It should instead focus strictly on evidence, criminal responsibility and the legal standards for proving that [Mother Han](#) personally knew about and approved specific unlawful acts.

From a 13-year demand to a two-year sentence

[Jeong](#) begins by emphasizing the striking circumstances surrounding the [verdict](#). [Mother Han](#), 83, heard the [sentence](#) while wearing a hospital gown and sitting in a wheelchair. The court imposed [two years in prison](#): one year for violating the Political Funds Act and another year for violations involving improper solicitation and occupational embezzlement.

For [Family Federation](#) members who had expected an acquittal, the [decision](#) was devastating.

Yet the [sentence](#) was dramatically lower than the 13 years sought by the special prosecutor. The

prosecution had requested five years for the political-funds violations and another eight years for the other charges.



Prosecution requested 4 years for former People Power Party lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong Dec.23, 2024



Prosecution requested 3 years and 6 months for Yoon Yeong-ho, former director general of the international headquarters of the [Family Federation](#), here February 11, 2022



Prosecution requested 13 years for [Hak Ja Han](#), aka. [Mother Han](#), far more than Yoon, whom the prosecutors portrayed as the person who directly planned and executed the overall activities. Here, Mother Han in ca. 2016

The prosecution requested four years for former lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong ([권성동](#)), who was accused of receiving 100 million won (in 2022, ca \$77,000 USD) from the [Family Federation](#) side. It requested three years and six months for former World Headquarters Director-General Yoon Yeong-ho ([윤영호](#)), whom prosecutors portrayed as the person who directly planned and executed the overall activities.

[Jeong](#) considers the request unusually severe, particularly because [Mother Han](#) is elderly, has no previous criminal record, and the case does not concern a violent crime. He also draws attention to the disparity between the sentences sought for the various defendants.

Yet the prosecution sought 13 years for [Mother Han](#).

That raises, Jeong suggests, a legitimate question: was her position as the supreme leader of the [religious organization](#), and the symbolic significance attached to her as the alleged "peak" of religion - politics collusion, effectively being reflected in the severity of the requested punishment?

What the first-instance court actually found

The [first-instance judgment](#) was considerably narrower than the prosecution's case.

The court acquitted [Mother Han](#) on some of the alleged "split donation" charges. It also dismissed certain charges concerning alleged destruction of evidence and embezzlement connected with funds allegedly provided to politicians overseas, concluding that these matters fell outside the special prosecutor's legally defined investigative mandate.

The court further rejected the argument that transferring church funds to prepare split political donations automatically constituted embezzlement.

For [Jeong](#), this is significant because it demonstrates that the court imposed legal limits on the special prosecutor's investigative authority. The Constitution's principle of due process, he stresses, means that the statutory mandate of a special prosecutor cannot simply be expanded whenever investigators encounter additional allegations.

At the same time, [Jeong](#) is careful not to characterize the [two-year sentence](#) as equivalent to an acquittal. The court did find [Mother Han](#) responsible, together with others, for important parts of the prosecution's case. In particular, it recognized her participation in and approval of the 100 million won (in 2022, ca \$77,000 USD) payment to Kweon, most of the split political donations, and the provision of luxury items such as a handbag and necklace to former First Lady Kim Keon-hee ([김건희](#)).

Nevertheless, the enormous reduction from 13 years to two is important. It suggests, in [Jeong's view](#), that the scale of criminality initially presented by the special prosecutor and [Mother Han](#)'s personal responsibility for it were substantially reduced during the trial.

The crucial question: what did [Mother Han](#) actually know?

This becomes the central issue [Jeong](#) wants the appeals court to examine.

There is an important distinction, he argues, between a religious leader approving the general direction of an organization's external activities and that same leader knowingly approving the specific unlawful methods allegedly used to pursue those activities.



The building housing Seoul High Court, where [Mother Han's](#) appeal case will be tried, and where also Seoul Central District Court is located. Image: Grok xAI

In other words, even if [Mother Han](#) approved contacts with politicians or broader political engagement by people around her, does that necessarily establish that she personally knew about and approved:

the delivery of 100 million won (in 2022, ca \$77,000 USD) in cash,

political donations made using other people's names,

or the provision of expensive gifts to a political figure's spouse?

Those are not necessarily the same thing.

[Jeong](#) therefore asks what evidence exists beyond the testimony of Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호). Are there documents, financial records, correspondence or other objective evidence demonstrating that [Mother Han](#) was informed about the specific transactions and knowingly approved them?

And, crucially, have contradictions between testimony and objective records actually been resolved?

This is especially important because the court treated Yoon as the person who played the leading role in planning the overall activities. If Yoon was the principal organizer, the prosecution still needs to establish the separate proposition that [Mother Han](#) possessed the specific knowledge of a crime and the criminal intent required to make her a joint principal offender.

That distinction is at the heart of the appeal.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon

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Mother Han’s Detention Suspension Extended Again

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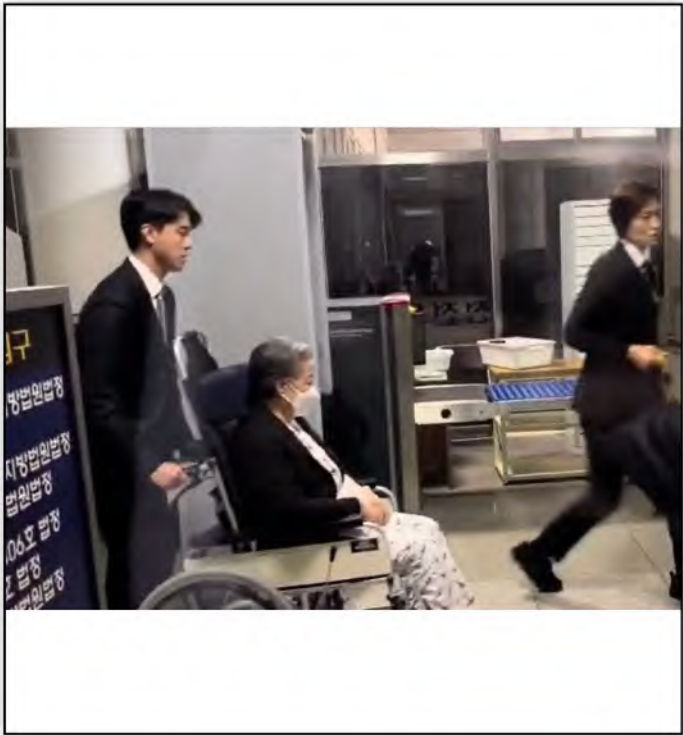
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Two-year sentence, no immediate detention for Mother Han as Seoul court grants another month-long suspension due to failing health for the frail 83-year-old

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The large South Korean media outlet **MBC News** reported on 1st September that the suspension of detention for

Hak Ja Han (한학자) – also called **Mother Han** – has been prolonged by *Seoul Central District Court* until 30th September.

See also [Responsibility Must Be Proven in Appeal Court](#)

This happened the day after she was sentenced to **two years in prison** at the first trial in the case concerning alleged “collusion between religion and politics”. The decision means that, despite receiving a custodial sentence, the 83-year-old religious leader will **not be taken into custody for the time being**. The latest extension keeps her out of detention until **6 p.m. on 30th September 2026**.



Frail **Mother Han** (83) in poor health has already been held for more than six months in such a **cell at Seoul Detention Center**. Will she survive two more years under similar conditions? Image: Chat GPT, 10th October 2025.

The development is important because a prison sentence and immediate imprisonment are not necessarily the same thing while a criminal case is still subject to appeal. **Mother Han's** legal team has indicated that the first-instance verdict will be challenged. Thus, the 31st August judgment is **not yet the final outcome of the criminal proceedings**.

What does “suspension of detention” mean?

The Korean legal term 구속집행정지/ literally means a **suspension of the execution of detention**. It is different from an acquittal, a pardon, or a cancellation of the underlying criminal case. Rather, it allows a person who is formally subject to detention to remain temporarily outside prison or a detention facility because of exceptional circumstances.

Such circumstances can include serious illness, medical treatment, childbirth or a close family member's funeral. In **Mother Han's** case, the court has repeatedly granted extensions on **health grounds**. She was originally detained about two weeks before being indicted in October 2025.

The court first approved short releases in **November 2025** (3 days), **February 2026** (10 days), and **March 2026** (34 days). Since **late April**, instead of issuing new releases, the court has simply extended her current release every month. This latest ruling is her fifth consecutive monthly extension.

This distinction is particularly important in understanding what happened on 31st August.



Logo of **MBC News**, the news division of the *Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)*, one of South Korea's four major nationwide television and radio networks.

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Mother Han was given a **two-year prison sentence**, but her existing suspension of detention was still in force.

Consequently, the court did not immediately take her into custody after announcing the sentence. Her previous suspension was due to expire at 6 p.m. on 2nd September, but according to [Newspim](#), on 1st September the court accepted her lawyers' request for another extension, moving the deadline to 30th September.

What happens when the suspension expires?

The suspension is **temporary**, so 30th September is not a guarantee that [Mother Han](#) will remain free indefinitely. When the current period expires, the court can either allow her to return to custody or, if the relevant circumstances continue to justify it, grant another extension.

In other words, **an extension prevents custody during the extended period; it does not erase the prison sentence**. Conversely, the expiration of a suspension does not necessarily mean that [Mother Han](#) must immediately begin serving her final sentence, because the first-instance judgment can be appealed and the appellate proceedings may still be underway.

This creates several possible scenarios over the coming months. If the court considers her medical condition sufficiently serious, her suspension of detention could potentially be extended again. If the court concludes that the grounds for suspension no longer justify keeping her outside custody, she could be ordered back into detention. At the same time, the appellate court will be considering the substance of her conviction and sentence.

The coming months are therefore likely to be crucial

The immediate situation is consequently one of **continued legal uncertainty rather than immediate imprisonment**. [Mother Han](#) remains outside custody at least until 30th September, while her legal team prepares to challenge the first-instance judgment. The court's repeated extensions since March demonstrate, as [News1](#) pointed out 30th July, that her health has already played a significant role in determining her detention status.



Logo of News1 (뉴스1), South Korea's largest private news agency and wire service.



The logo of YTN (주식회사 와이티엔), South Korea's first 24-hour television news network, operating as a prominent cable and multimedia broadcaster.

The first-instance court sentenced [Mother Han](#) to two years – according to [YTN](#) on 31st August, one year for violating the *Political Funds Act* and one year for violations involving the *Improper Solicitation and Graft Act* and occupational embezzlement. The prosecution had sought a considerably heavier sentence of **13 years**.

Thus, the 30th September date should best be understood as **the next point at which Mother Han's detention status will have**

to be reconsidered, not as the date on which her two-year sentence automatically begins. If her appeal proceeds normally and another suspension is granted, she could remain outside custody for considerably longer. If the suspension is not renewed, however, she could face detention while the legal process continues.

The [MBC News report](#) therefore highlights an important distinction that can easily be missed when reporting the verdict: **Hak Ja Han has been sentenced to prison, but she has not, at least for now, been sent to prison.**

See also [Responsibility Must Be Proven in Appeal Court](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#), aka. Mother Han, being wheeled into the courtroom by her grandson Moon Shin-chul at Seoul Central District Court 31st August 2026. Photo: Dr. Michael Balcomb

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