

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: S Korean State Power Should Not Override Religious Freedom

Knut Holdhus
September 5, 2026



Scales of freedom and constitutional boundary. Illustration: ChatGPT,

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)

[Segye Ilbo](#) Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su

The power to prosecute must not become the power to intrude: Protecting religious autonomy from the misuse of state power

Continued from part 1 [Responsibility Must Be Proven in Appeal Court](#)

Religious freedom and the danger of state intrusion

The most significant broader issue raised by religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in his [column](#) in the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) on 31st August concerns religious freedom and the relationship between religious organizations and state power.

See also [Special Prosecutor Appeal for Harsher Sentence](#)

He acknowledges an important principle: religious leaders are not above the law. If a religious leader commits a crime, that person should be held accountable.

But the opposite principle is equally important. The constitutional protection of freedom of religion and separation of religion and state does not merely mean that religious

organizations must stay away from political power. It also means that the state must respect the autonomous sphere of religious life and must not intrude into it arbitrarily.

This distinction is particularly relevant in a case involving the leader of a minority religious organization.

[Jeong](#) warns that if someone's position as the supreme leader of a religious organization is treated as sufficient evidence of criminal participation, then religious hierarchy could begin to substitute for proof of individual criminal intent.

That would establish a dangerous precedent. A leader could potentially be held criminally responsible for actions carried out by subordinates simply because of the leader's institutional position or because the organization as a whole had engaged in controversial political or social activities.



Do special prosecutors want to hold her responsible for unlawful actions carried out by subordinates simply because of her position as leader? [Mother Han](#), here being [released](#) for urgent medical treatment on March 27, 2026

For [Jeong](#), this is not merely a [Family Federation](#) issue. It potentially concerns all religious communities.

If concrete evidence of conspiracy, knowledge and intent is replaced by assumptions based on religious authority, organizational hierarchy or political controversy, no religious group can be confident that its constitutional autonomy is secure.

Ordinary believers should not become collateral damage

[Jeong](#) also makes an important distinction between the leadership of the [Family Federation](#) and its ordinary members.

The people who have suffered most from the controversy, he argues, are often ordinary believers who have no connection whatsoever with political power. They are people who contributed money to their religious community and maintained their faith over many years.

They should not automatically be stigmatized by descriptions of the [religious organization](#) as a "money-driven group" or as an example of "religion - politics collusion".

His blunt conclusion is: "**The believers are not criminals.**"

This point reinforces his broader argument that scrutiny of alleged wrongdoing by religious

leaders must not become a justification for treating an entire religious community as inherently suspect.

The appeal must be independent of politics



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

Ultimately, [Jeong](#) argues that the appeals court should resist the temptation to treat the [first-instance judgment](#) as a politically convenient compromise.

The two-year sentence might appear to occupy a middle ground: the special prosecutor obtained convictions, while the court rejected some charges and restricted the scope of the investigation. [Hak Ja Han's](#) side, meanwhile, can point to the dramatic reduction from 13 years to two as a reason to pursue an appeal.

But criminal justice is not supposed to be a negotiated settlement between competing political interests.

The appellate court should therefore neither protect the special prosecutor's reputation nor preserve the government's investigative achievements. Nor should it attempt to satisfy the expectations of the [Family Federation](#).

Its task is narrower and more demanding: to determine whether the evidence establishes beyond reasonable doubt that [Mother Han](#) personally knew about and approved the specific unlawful acts attributed to her.

That is why [Jeong's](#) final image of the "scales" of the appellate court is so significant. What belongs on those scales, he says, is not public approval or hostility toward a minority religion, nor the political significance attached to the case.

It is simply the weight of the evidence and the weight of individual responsibility.

And behind that legal question lies an even larger constitutional one: how can a democratic state punish genuine criminal conduct within a religious organization without allowing the investigation and prosecution of that conduct to become an intrusion into religious freedom itself? For [Jeong](#), ensuring that this boundary is respected may be one of the most important tasks facing the appellate court.

Continued from part 1 [Responsibility Must Be Proven in Appeal Court](#)

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On 31st August, the BBC – the world's oldest national broadcaster and self-professed standard of

global journalistic integrity – published a [news report](#) on the [sentencing of Hak Ja Han](#) by a Seoul court. Co-authored by Seoul correspondent Jake Kwon and Singapore-based journalist Fan Wang, the article quickly abandoned objective reporting in favor of biased, derogatory framing.

The slurs begin in the headline itself, which prominently features the derogatory term "Moonies". The [text](#) goes on to repeat the word twice more, pairing it with the weaponized descriptor "cult-like". Labels like "Moonies" are deeply offensive to members of the [Family Federation](#), carrying a derogatory weight comparable to racial slurs used against people of color. This terminology is frequently used by left-wing and anti-religious activists to denigrate and ridicule the [Family Federation](#) and its followers.

Responsible media outlets have long recognized this; the [Reuters handbook for journalists](#) explicitly states:



"'Moonie' is a pejorative term for members of the [Unification Church](#). We should not use it in copy and avoid it when possible in direct quotations." (p321)

The New York Times

The logo of The New York Times. Photo: Ed Benguiat. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#)

Also the New York Times states in its "[Manual of Style and Usage](#)" of 2015, "Do not use the disparaging Moonie(s)." (p466)

Why did the BBC ignore this standard? Because it is remarkably easy to apply a "cult" label to a minority faith that lacks the numerical defense of mainstream religions. As Massimo Introvigne, a leading sociologist of religion and expert on new religious movements, observed:

"But what is a 'cult'? A large majority of scholars of religion agree that there are no cults. 'Cult' is just a label used to discriminate against groups that powerful lobbies, for whatever reasons, do not like." ([The Abe Assassination. The Word "Cult" Is A Tool for Discrimination, Bitter Winter](#) 2nd Sept. 2022)

The BBC's reliance on biased framing deepens when it highlights allegations made by unnamed "lawyers" against the [Family Federation](#). In the interest of fairness, the broadcaster should have identified these individuals. They belong to the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* – an organization established by far-left activists from Japan's Communist and Socialist parties. The explicit, ongoing goal of this network has always been to destroy the [Family Federation](#) due to the faith's vocal opposition to totalitarian, materialistic communist ideology. By presenting a politically motivated lobby group as neutral legal experts, the BBC fundamentally misled its audience.

This pattern of suspicion-by-association continues when the [article](#)



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion, founder of [CESNUR](#), specializing in new religious movements and religious liberty. A prolific author, he has advised governments and international bodies, and served as OSCE Representative on combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians worldwide and comments on contemporary religious controversies. Here speaking at the UN Office at Geneva on 16th June 2025. Screenshot from video by UPF.

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claims the [Family Federation](#) “boasted extensive links to politicians in Seoul, Tokyo, and even in Washington.” By embedding this statement in a narrative of alleged wrongdoing, the BBC casts standard political engagement in a sinister light. In reality, these “links” primarily consisted of international statesmen or parliamentarians sending or delivering in person routine congratulatory messages to large-scale global peace summits, particularly those focusing on the Korean peninsula.



Not so close ties with the [Family Federation](#): Shinzo Abe here in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated. He introduced policies that significantly disadvantaged the [Federation](#). Photo: United States Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

Politicians have never granted the [Family Federation](#) special favors or undue benefits. In fact, far from rewarding the organization, the government led by Shinzo Abe introduced policies that significantly disadvantaged the movement.

Finally, the BBC attempts to isolate the faith globally by asserting that “The group is banned in parts of the world, including Singapore.” What the broadcaster conveniently omits is the authoritarian nature of Singapore’s governance. To maintain strict “social stability”, Singapore enforces a highly restrictive regulatory blanket over all social, political, and religious associations – the Jehovah’s Witnesses face the same ban. While the BBC only names Singapore, its use of the plural phrase “parts of the world” is technically accurate for a disturbing

reason: the [Family Federation](#) is also banned in communist China, alongside numerous other religious groups.

By echoing the vocabulary of anti-religious activists and filtering facts through a highly selective lens, the BBC did not just report the news – it participated in a campaign of religious discrimination.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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