FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's Faith War - Prosecution to Dissolution

Knut Holdhus
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From prosecution to dissolution. Illustration: ChatGPT

The Washington Times

Former Speaker of the USA House Newt Gingrich speaking at CPAC in 2010

The conviction of Hak Ja Han (co-founder and international leader of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, has become the centerpiece of a much broader controversy over religious freedom in South Korea. In an opinion article published by The Washington Times on 31st August, former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich argues that the case should not be viewed simply as a dispute over political financing or as an ordinary criminal prosecution. Rather, he presents it as evidence of a systematic, state-sponsored campaign to weaken and ultimately dismantle religious movements regarded as politically or socially conservative

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Gingrich places the South Korean case within what he describes as a worldwide assault on religious freedom. In his assessment, this assault has traditionally been associated with openly authoritarian or communist regimes, where governments have used state power to suppress religious belief and organizations considered hostile to official ideology. What concerns him, however, is that similar mechanisms are increasingly appearing within democratic societies. He describes the phenomenon as a "global war on God", arguing that the state is being transformed from a guarantor of religious liberty into an instrument for restricting and eliminating religious communities.

For Gingrich, South Korea represents an especially important test case because it is a longstanding democratic ally of the United States. The country therefore occupies a very different political category from authoritarian states where religious repression might be expected. Since the Korean War, American military forces have remained in South Korea as part of the broader effort to protect the country's security and democratic system. Gingrich argues that the use of state power against religious organizations in such a country should therefore concern not only South Koreans but the entire democratic world.

He points first to a series of cases involving Christian leaders. Presbyterian pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of the Presbyterian Segyero Church (세계로교회) in the large city of Busan, Gingrich writes, was imprisoned and convicted after opposing what he regarded as a "woke" agenda in public schools and

defending Christian values. He also cites the arrest and prosecution of 95-year-old Lee Man-hee (이만희), leader of Shincheonji Church, together with investigations and raids involving other churches. Gingrich interprets these cases as indications of a broader pattern in which religious organizations can become targets when their beliefs or political positions are perceived as incompatible with the priorities of the government.

Pastor Son Hyun-bo of Segyero Church in Busan, August 2025 From criminal prosecution to possible dissolution, Gingrich warns that the state's trial against Hak Ja Han is part of a broader war against religious freedom

Will soon have been one year in pretrial detention in spite of her advanced age and serious health problems, being legally blind, suffering from a severe heart condition and having undergone major shoulder surgery while in detention: Dr. Hak Ja Han, aka. Mother Han, as she appeared at Seoul Central District Court 31st August 31, 2026

The case of Hak Ja Han (한학자 - also called Mother Han - is, however, central to his argument.

Mother Han, 83, became the sole leader of the Family Federation following the death of her husband, Sun Myung Moon (문선명), in 2012. Gingrich emphasizes Moon's own history of imprisonment under communism and portrays the Family Federation as a global religious movement that has expanded into more than 140 countries. He also stresses activities associated with the organization and Mother Han's leadership, including international conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue and advocacy for religious freedom. These activities, he notes, contributed to her nomination for the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize.

Against this background, Gingrich portrays Mother Han's prosecution as particularly troubling. He points to her age and serious health problems, noting that she is legally blind, suffers from a severe heart condition and underwent major shoulder surgery while in detention. At the time of his article, she had spent approximately 340 days in pretrial detention. Seoul special prosecutors had also sought a 13-year prison sentence on allegations involving bribery and violations of political-funds legislation.

Gingrich argues that the significance of the case extends beyond the specific criminal charges. In his view, the prosecution represents the first stage of a much broader campaign directed at the Family Federation itself. He describes the criminal proceedings as the "spearhead" of a coordinated effort in which legal prosecution, political rhetoric and proposed legislation could work together to place increasing pressure on the organization.

Particularly significant, in Gingrich's interpretation, is the possibility of institutional dissolution. He points to statements attributed to members of the government of President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) concerning the use of foreign dissolution orders as a model for disbanding the Family Federation. He also highlights President Lee's public characterization of the organization as "heretical" and his call for its dissolution.

For Gingrich, such rhetoric becomes especially consequential when combined with legislative initiatives. He discusses Civil Code Amendment Bill No. 2215932, which he says has been nicknamed the "Church Dissolution Act." According to his description, the proposed legislation would give the government extensive powers to audit, inspect and potentially dissolve religious organizations that it determines have "interfered in politics". Gingrich warns that broadly defined or undefined criteria could potentially be applied far beyond the organization currently under scrutiny.

The issue, therefore, is not merely whether a particular religious leader committed a criminal offense. Gingrich frames the deeper question as one of state power and religious autonomy: how far may a democratic government go in regulating, investigating, financially penalizing or ultimately dissolving a religious organization because of its political activities or perceived political influence?

He notes that major Christian organizations, including the World Evangelical Alliance, a global alliance of evangelical Christians, have expressed opposition to the proposed legislation precisely because of the possibility that vague standards could eventually be used against other religious communities. From this perspective, the Family Federation becomes a possible precedent: a government action initially justified

against one controversial or politically unpopular movement could establish legal mechanisms subsequently applicable to a much wider range of religious organizations.

Advocating for Japanese dissolution order as a model for disbanding the Family Federation in South Korea: Minister of Justice Jeong Seong-ho (also anglicized as Chung Sung-ho)

Gingrich consequently presents South Korea as a warning to other democracies. If an elderly religious leader with an international peacebuilding record can be imprisoned and convicted, while the organization she leads faces possible dissolution through the combined use of criminal proceedings, political pressure and new legislative powers, he argues that no religious community can assume that it is permanently protected from state overreach.

His conclusion is therefore directed beyond Seoul. The conviction of Hak Ja Han (한학자), in Gingrich's view, should prompt democratic societies to reconsider the boundaries between legitimate law enforcement and governmental interference with religious freedom. The central question is whether South Korea will remain a democratic "beacon of freedom" or move toward what he calls a communist-inspired, anti-religious authoritarianism.

For Gingrich, the international community should not remain silent. He calls on democratic governments, and particularly the United States, to defend religious liberty and to make clear that attacks on religious organizations can have consequences for international relationships. He specifically urges President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio to raise the issue with Seoul.

The larger warning running through the article is stark: when political disagreement with a religious movement becomes grounds for mobilizing the coercive power of the state against its leaders, institutions and assets, the principle of religious freedom itself is placed at risk. In Gingrich's interpretation, the prosecution of Mother Han is therefore not simply a Korean legal controversy. It is a test of whether modern democracies can resist the temptation to use state power to dismantle religious movements they regard as troublesome, conservative or politically inconvenient.

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Mother Han Appeal Tests Prosecutorial Authority

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Responsibility Must Be Proven In Appeal Court

Dr. Hak Ja Han, aka. Mother Han, as she appeared at Seoul Central District Court 31st August 2026. Photo: Dr. Michael Balcomb, resolution improved by ChatGPT, 6th September 2026

instance verdict against **Hak Ja Han** (한학자), leader of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* – commonly referred to in South Korea as Unificationism (통일교) – has now been challenged by both the defense and the prosecution. According to South Korean media reports published on 7th September 2026, she **filed an appeal** on 4th September against her two-year prison sentence.

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The special prosecutor's team, headed by Min Joong-gi *(민중기)*, filed its own appeal the same day, seeking a more severe outcome. The case will therefore proceed to the appellate court, where both sides will challenge different aspects of the *Seoul Central District Court*'s ruling.

The reports also make clear that the first-instance judgment was considerably narrower than the full range of allegations brought by the special prosecutor. While the court found Hak Ja Han (한학자) – also called Mother Han – guilty of several offenses connected with political funds, gifts to former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희) and occupational embezzlement, it acquitted her on some embezzlement allegations and dismissed other charges on jurisdictional grounds, finding that they lay outside the special prosecutor's legally defined investigative mandate.

Yonhap News**: Both sides appeal**

Yonhap News, in a report by Lee Seung-yeon (이승연), states that Mother Han submitted her appeal to the *Seoul Central District Court*'s Criminal Division 27 on 4th September. Former Family Federation World Headquarters Director-General **Yoon Yeong-ho** (윤영호), former Chairman's Office Director **Jeong Won-ju (정원주)**, and former Finance Director **Lee** also appealed that day.

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

Yonhap explains that the special prosecutor's team had likewise appealed on 4th September, arguing that the first-instance court had made errors in its interpretation of the law and had imposed inappropriate sentences.

The article summarizes the punishment imposed on Mother Han as **one year for violating the *Political Funds Act* and a further year for violating the *Anti-Graft Act* and committing occupational embezzlement**. At the same time, the court rejected some of the embezzlement allegations and dismissed charges concerning alleged obstruction of evidence destruction and alleged embezzlement related to election funding for foreign politicians. In these cases, the judges concluded that the allegations fell outside the scope of the special prosecutor's statutory authority.

Yonhap also reports that, on the day after the 31st August sentencing, the court extended Mother Han's suspension of detention **until 30th September at 6 p.m.**, citing her health. The special prosecutor's team

September at 6 p.m., citing her health. The special prosecutor's team has separately appealed this decision. Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) received a six-month prison sentence, while Jeong Won-ju and the former Finance Director received suspended prison terms.

News1**: Details of the alleged political lobbying**

News1, in a report by Han Su-hyeon (한수현), provides more detail about the allegations underlying the convictions. According to the article, Mother Han, Jeong Won-ju (정원주) and Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) were accused of providing **100 million won in political funds to former** People Power Party **lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong** (권성동) **in January 2022**, as well as arranging approximately **144 million won in split donations** to *People Power Party* lawmakers and others.

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

The report also describes the allegation that Mother Han and Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) were involved in providing **luxury goods worth more than 80 million won to Kim Keon-hee**, including a diamond necklace from the British jeweler Graff. These purchases, together with the political contributions, formed part of the prosecution's broader allegations that Family Federation funds had been misappropriated for political purposes.

News1 further reports that Mother Han and Jeong Won-ju (정원주) were accused of obtaining information in October 2022 about an investigation into overseas casino gambling in Las Vegas and subsequently instructing Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) to destroy evidence.

***Suspended sentence** for Jeong Won-ju (정원주), here on 19th Jan. 2025. Screenshot from FFWPU video, improved resolution by ChatGPT, 31st July 2026.*

The article gives additional information about the other defendants' sentences. Jeong Won-ju (정원주) received **eight months' imprisonment, suspended for two years**, for each of the *Political Funds Act* and Anti-Graft Act/occupational embezzlement charges. Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) was sentenced to six months in prison, while Yoon's wife received six months, suspended for one year.

News1 also provides background on Mother Han's detention status. She was placed under suspension of detention on **27th March**, after health problems, and the measure was repeatedly extended. Following the 31st August verdict, the court granted another extension, while the special prosecutor's team appealed against the decision.

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

What the appeals mean

The **7th September reports collectively show that the** first-instance ruling **is far from the end of the case**. Mother Han and the other defendants are challenging the convictions and sentences, while the special prosecutor is seeking a harsher punishment and contesting the court's interpretation of the limits of its investigative authority.

The appellate court will therefore be asked to examine both **the convictions themselves and the scope and severity of the first-**

convictions themselves and the scope and severity of the first-instance judgment. An important feature of the appeal is that the prosecution is not simply arguing that the two-year sentence was too lenient; it is also challenging the court's treatment of several allegations that were dismissed because they were considered outside the special prosecutor's statutory remit.

For the time being, Mother Han remains outside custody under the court's suspension-of-detention order, which is currently scheduled to remain in force until **30th September at 6 p.m.**, unless that decision is altered on appeal.

The 7th September reports do not indicate when the appellate court is expected to deliver its ruling.

The Family Federation's grounds for appeal

The reasons for Mother Han's appeal received less attention in the media reports from 4th to 7th September than the special prosecutor's arguments for seeking a harsher sentence. However, statements issued by the Family Federation immediately after the 31st August verdict make the defense position clearer.

*The logo of **Local Segye** (로컬세계), a South Korean online news media outlet and newspaper, founded on the editorial philosophy of "View news from all corners of the country at a single glance". It operates primarily as a sister publication of the major daily newspaper Segye Ilbo (세계일보).*

According to the online news media outlet and newspaper Local Segye (로컬세계) on 31st August, the Federation said it could not accept the court's finding that Mother Han had directly instructed the alleged activities or had been aware of and approved their illegal purpose. It also said there was **no objective evidence** establishing such direct instructions and indicated that the application of the legal concept of joint criminal responsibility would be challenged in the appellate court.

This position is consistent with the defense arguments presented during the trial. Yonhap News wrote already in an article on 1st December 2025 that Mother Han's lawyers repeatedly challenged the reliability of former World Headquarters Director-General Yoon Yeong-ho's testimony and argued that he had acted independently. They also maintained that Mother Han had neither instructed nor been informed about the luxury gifts allegedly delivered to Kim Keon-hee (김건희). Mother Han herself stated in court in June that she had neither given Kweon Seong-dong (권성동) the 100 million won nor provided gifts to Kim Keon-hee, attributing the allegations to actions and statements by Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호).

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***Featured image** above: Mother Han appeal testing prosecutorial authority. Illustration: Chat GPT, 7th September 2026.*

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