FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Massimo Introvigne: Mother Han Guilty Without Proof?

Knut Holdhus
September 13, 2026

Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an Italian scholar specializing in the sociology of religion. He founded and serves as managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, an international network of academics focused on the study of new religious movements. He has authored around 70 books and over 100 scholarly articles in this field. Here, speaking in Geneva, Switzerland June 16, 2025

Bitter Winter, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights

Did presiding judge Woo In-seong (image above) and his associates sentence Mother Han "leniently" to save the prosecutors' face - as Introvigne suggests - in such a politically motivated case where the astonishing absence of concrete proof points to an obvious acquittal? Image: Grok xAI July 30, 2026

Pointing out the dangerous politics behind South Korea's weaponization of justice, Introvigne concludes that Mother Han's guilty verdict is a miscarriage of justice

The recent verdict by the Seoul Central District Court sentencing 83-year-old Hak Ja Han (한학자), leader of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), to two years in prison has sent shockwaves through the international human rights community. While a two-year sentence may appear "lenient" compared to the staggering thirteen years demanded by the prosecution, a closer analysis of the case reveals a deeply troubling reality.

According to Dr. Massimo Introvigne, one of the world's leading scholars on new religious movements and a prominent activist for religious freedom, this trial is not a sober application of the law. Instead, it represents a politically motivated campaign of retaliation masquerading as judicial process, built on an astonishing absence of concrete proof.

Writing for Bitter Winter on 31st August 2026, Dr. Introvigne positions his publication with unwavering clarity: Hak Ja Han (한학자) - also referred to as Mother Han - is innocent and should have been acquitted. The specific case decided by the court centers on allegations that she authorized high-value gifts - specifically a Chanel handbag and a diamond necklace - to a former First Lady, alongside claims of illegal financial support to politicians.

Introvigne systematically dismantles the prosecution's narrative, pointing out that the entire case rests precariously on the testimony of a single former Family Federation executive who was expelled from the movement. This star witness possesses a glaring conflict of interest, having altered his timeline and narrative multiple times to mirror the prosecutors' shifting legal theories. Nothing in the official record demonstrates that Mother Han ordered,

approved, or was even aware of the rogue executive's actions.

Pastor Son Hyun-bo of Segyero Church in Busan, August 2025

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

Furthermore, the financial scope of the allegations undermines the prosecution's grand conspiracy theory. The gifts and donations total less than $250,000 - an amount Introvigne notes is roughly equivalent to a modest apartment in Seoul. The notion that national and international political structures could be bought for such a sum is absurd. The massive discrepancy between the prosecutor's 13-year demand and the actual evidence suggests that the state's primary objective was not justice, but the systemic destruction of the Family Federation.

To understand why this ruling is so dangerous, one must look at the broader context provided in the article. Introvigne notes that Mother Han's prosecution is part of a wider, systemic campaign by South Korean authorities against conservative and non-traditional religious groups. He explicitly points to the past harassment and arrests of other religious figures, such as Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of Segyero Church (세계로교회) and Chairman Lee Man-hee (95 - 이만희) of Shincheonji [See editor's note below].

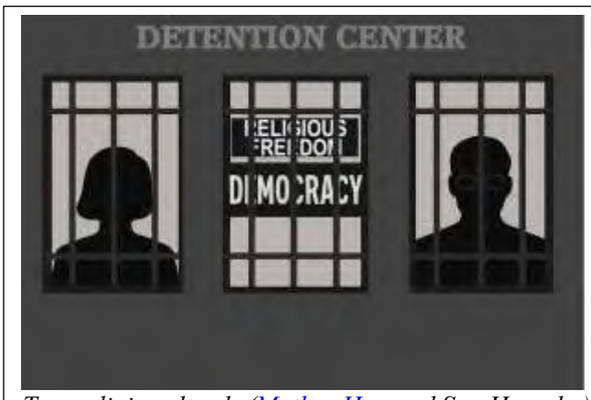
Segyero Church is a prominent conservative Presbyterian church led by Pastor Son Hyun-bo. It gained national attention for its fierce resistance to government overreach, particularly regarding strict state mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to legal standoffs over the right to assembly and worship.

Shincheonji (Shincheonji Church of Jesus) [See editor's note below] is a highly visible new religious movement founded by Lee Man-hee. The group faced intense legal and social scapegoating by South Korean authorities, who used expansive interpretations of the law to arrest its leadership and pressure its members.

By drawing parallels to Segyero Church and Shincheonji, Introvigne demonstrates that South Korean prosecutors are utilizing highly elastic interpretations of election and contribution laws to effectively criminalize the normal civic participation of religious believers.

A Dangerous Precedent for Global Religious Liberty

The weaponization of the judicial system to target religious minorities has international ramifications. Introvigne highlights a disturbing geopolitical undercurrent: the anti-cult campaigns inside South Korea do not exist in a vacuum. They are deeply intertwined with Japanese anti-cult organizations and have ideological ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), both of which seek to dismantle these movements.



Two religious heads (Mother Han and Son Hyun-bo) in long-term detention in South Korea in flagrant violation of religious freedom and democratic rights. Illustration: Chat GPT October 11, 2025

The trial of Mother Han in South Korea is heavily influenced by cross-border pressures, specifically the aggressive anti-cult movement in Japan following the 2022 assassination of Shinzo Abe and the totalitarian Xie Jiao doctrine exported by the Chinese Communist Party.

Xie Jiao (邪教) refers to organizations promoting "heterodox teachings". While often officially translated by China as "evil cults," the doctrine is a legal and political designation used since imperial times to ban religious movements. The Chinese Communist Party applies this label to groups that operate outside state control, deify leaders, or threaten social stability. According to article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, it is dealt with as a crime to be an active participant in a xie jiao.

These external ideological and political forces have pushed the left-leaning Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration to adopt punitive legal measures against the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, thus threatening domestic religious pluralism.

When a democratic nation like South Korea allows its prosecutors to pursue special missions against "heretical cults" using fragile, contradictory testimony, the rule of law itself is compromised. The court's decision to grant a two-year sentence rather than thirteen may look like a compromise, but as Introvigne rightly asserts, saving the prosecution's face at the expense of an innocent person's freedom is a miscarriage of justice.

Ultimately, the case against Mother Han is a bellwether for the state of democracy in South Korea. When state actors treat religious communities as political adversaries rather than citizens with protected rights, religious freedom ceases to be a guaranteed liberty and instead becomes a privilege subject to the whims of the ruling political class.

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: Mother Han Sentenced to Two Years. She Is Innocent

by Massimo Introvigne | Aug 31, 2026 | News Global

The prosecutor had requested thirteen years. But innocent defendants should be acquitted, not receive "lenient" sentences to save the prosecutors' face.

by Massimo Introvigne

Mother Han arrives at the District Court. Screenshot.

The Seoul Central District Court delivered a first-degree verdict in one of the criminal cases involving Mother Hak Ja Han Moon, the 83-year-old leader of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), formerly known as the Unification Church. The prosecution of the religious leader has become a symbol of the pressures conservative believers face in Korea today. Observers have followed a judicial process that expanded, contracted, and changed shape in ways that reveal the disturbing climate surrounding religion in the country.

This magazine's position is not one of doubt, uncertainty, or ambiguity. Mother Han is innocent and should have been acquitted.

The case decided on August 31 began with allegations that Mother Han had authorized the gift of a Chanel handbag and a diamond necklace to the former First Lady. The special prosecutor later added claims that Mother Han was responsible for the financial support FFWPU provided to politicians in violation of the laws governing political contributions. The prosecutor merged these accusations into a single narrative and presented them as evidence of an attempt to influence political life.

A separate, still-pending case concerns contributions reportedly made by FFWPU members to several other MPs. After months of investigation, prosecutors concluded there is no evidence that Mother Han knew about these contributions. She has not been indicted in this second case and is no longer part of it, although other FFWPU leaders remain defendants.

There are other cases against Mother Han. One involves the alleged mass enrollment of FFWPU members in the conservative PPP party, which, even if true, in other countries would be considered part of the normal

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even if true, in other countries would be considered part of the normal exercise of religious believers' rights to participate in political life. Another concerns the alleged embezzlement of church funds—a case of stealing from her own pocket, given how intertwined the leader's and the corporation's funds are in new religious movements. Further charges and cases may be added, given the broad latitude afforded to special prosecutors on a mission to destroy the FFWPU.

The first case, the only one decided on August 31 in first degree, and subject to appeal, rests entirely on the testimony of a former FFWPU executive who was expelled from the movement. His accounts have shifted repeatedly. Documents, timelines, and his own earlier statements contradict him. He has adjusted his narrative each time prosecutors modified their theory. His credibility has collapsed under the weight of inconsistency and self-interest. He sought to protect himself by accusing Mother Han, and the prosecution chose to rely on him as its foundation.

The prosecutor requested a penalty of thirteen years, which even the court regarded as disproportionate. The donations and gifts cited in the decision total less than 250,000 dollars. Presenting such modest sums as evidence of a grand political scheme creates an absurd impression. Korean politicians may be cheap, but it is difficult to believe that their national and international political choices could be bought for the price of a modest apartment in Seoul. The disproportionate request suggests political retaliation by the special prosecutor appointed to investigate the wrongdoings of the so-called "heretical cults" rather than a sober application of the law.

The court's decision to sentence Mother Han to two years in jail, rather than the requested thirteen, restores a modicum of common sense to the case. But this is not good enough. Let me repeat this. Mother Han is innocent. Nothing in the record shows that she ordered, approved, or even knew of the acts of the FFWPU's rogue executive. Innocent defendants should be acquitted, not sentenced "leniently" to save the prosecutors' face.

Her prosecution has become part of a wider campaign against conservative religion in South Korea. Pastor Son Hyun-bo of Segero Church, Chairman Lee Man-hee of Shincheonji, and other leaders have faced similar pressures and have been arrested. Authorities have embraced expansive interpretations of election and contribution laws that, if accepted, would prevent believers from participating in political life. The consequences of this and of the other pending Mother Han cases reach far beyond one defendant.

The decision punishes an older woman whose life has been devoted to religious and humanitarian work. Millions worldwide call her the Mother of Peace. It also reveals that South Korea continues down a path where conservative religious communities are treated as political adversaries and where prosecutors use fragile testimony to dismantle movements they dislike. Campaigns against these groups in Korea are carried out with disturbing connections to Japanese anti-cult organizations and the Chinese Communist Party.

The case against Mother Han has become a symbol of this trend, and her innocence stands as a reminder of the dangers facing religious freedom in the country.

Religious Liberty, South Africa, Unification Church

Massimo Introvigne

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board

for the Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion and of the executive board of University of Pennsylvania Press' Nova Religio. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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Against The Odds, Fujisawa Church Reopens

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Family Federation Church Reopens as Believers Gather Despite Headwinds of Dissolution

Logo of the Sekai Nippo

NEWS Close-Up

by Takahide Ishii (石井 孝秀)

"We wanted to return as soon as possible" Even during liquidation

With the dissolution of the religious corporation of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (FFWPU, formerly the Unification Church) now finalized, one issue troubling its members is the loss of the "places" where they can practice their faith. Many have been holding gatherings in members' homes or streaming worship services online, but some have experienced emotional distress because facilities to which they had become attached are no longer available for use.

At the same time, there have been cases in which churches located in rented properties have been able to resume religious activities. On 1st July, ahead of churches elsewhere in Japan, the *Fujisawa Family Church* of the Family Federation, located in Fujisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture, was returned to its members. We visited the church.

A room inside Fujisawa Family Church of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (a religious organization), which reopened on 1st July 2026 after being under the management of a liquidator, afternoon of 27th August, Fujisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井 孝秀)

Fujisawa Family Church is located about a five-minute walk from JR Fujisawa Station. The church had originally occupied all but the first and third floors of a seven-story building. Since 1st July, however, it has been renting only the fifth through seventh floors and using them as church facilities.

The person responsible for the church, Koasaburo Sasaki (々木耕三郎), had spent many years working in education for second-generation members. Remarkably, he assumed his position as "church pastor" on 4th March – the very day the *Tokyo High Court* issued its decision ordering the dissolution of the religious corporation.

After quickly completing his introductory greetings, Sasaki was meeting with staff to discuss what to do next after seeing the news reports when, at around 2 p.m., two lawyers acting on behalf of the liquidator arrived at the church.

Sasaki said, "I had mixed feelings about the situation, but there was no point in letting my emotions get the better of me."

> "Rather, because the church facility was a rented property, I thought that once the liquidator's work was completed, we

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> thought that once the liquidator's work was completed, we might be able to use the church again. I firmly resolved that we should bring this to an end as quickly as possible – even by as little as one day sooner – and move on to the next stage."

After handing over everything to the liquidator, including cash, bankbooks and keys, mainly the staff responsible for general administration and accounting became involved in the liquidation process.

Because securing the assets of the church, which had been a religious corporation, was the liquidator's highest priority, members could no longer enter or leave the facility. To provide members with somewhere to go, Sasaki began renting outside venues and holding gatherings there.

> "Even in the face of these headwinds, we were grateful that so many members came to the gatherings."

Sasaki expresses his gratitude. Each time, equipment for streaming the services was also transported to the venue, with the help of second-generation members, so that those unable to attend in person could participate remotely.

However, unlike at a church facility, outside venues had to be cleared out as soon as the scheduled time approached its end.

> "I felt a sense of loneliness. At the church, even after worship had ended, everyone could stay and interact with one another. I imagine the members felt the same way."

Location of Fujisawa. Illustration: Maximilian Dörrbecker (Chumhwa) / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp

Sasaki says he was also encouraged by the way members came together as one, voluntarily visiting one another's homes and checking on each other.
Regular gatherings were held at several different venues, but the inconvenience remained. Some members even went to the wrong meeting place. Sasaki and the members persevered through this period without a place where they could pray, driven by a single desire:

> "We wanted to return to our church as soon as possible, even by as little as one day sooner."

On 1st July, partly because the liquidator's side was also eager to complete its work quickly, the church was able to take over the facility in almost exactly its previous condition by purchasing the equipment and furnishings that had originally been inside it.

Another major factor was that the church members had built a relationship of trust with the owner of the property and were able to obtain the owner's consent to "continue using it just as before".

Among the Family Federation churches that had been closed, *Fujisawa Family Church* was therefore able to return to its facilities at a relatively early stage. Sasaki recalls:

> "Many members were truly delighted to be able to return to a place they had thought they would 'never be able to use again.'"

Some members had been shocked by the reports of the dissolution and had stopped attending gatherings. But with the church facility restored, some of them have begun coming back.

One second-generation member, a man in his 20s, said:

> "The atmosphere is completely different from an outside venue. It was difficult to participate when you had children with you, but it is much easier to come to the church facility."

Nevertheless, Sasaki emphasizes that the situation remains difficult:

> "There are still people whose wounds have not healed. That is precisely why we need to make further reforms so that the church can become an even more comfortable and welcoming place."

He also spoke frankly about the situation nationwide:

> "If you look across Japan, there are churches with no prospect of returning to their facilities. The Fujisawa church was simply fortunate. The real challenge begins now."

Featured image *above:* Koasaburo Sasaki(々木耕三郎), pastor of Fujisawa Family Church, 27th August afternoon, Fujisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井 孝秀)

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