

## FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: S Korean Cops 13-Hour Grilling of Won-Ju McDevitt

Knut Holdhus  
December 20, 2025



Cartoon version of South Korean police interrogation. Illustration: Grok xAI



**Top aide to Mother Han in marathon interrogation at escalation of police probe into lobbying as politicians from both large parties are named**

The large South Korean daily JoongAng Ilbo published on 18th December an article headlined "[Police Question Former Chief of Staff to Hak Ja Han for 13 Hours... Investigation into Unification Church Allegations Accelerates](#)".

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Jeong Won-joo [McDevitt],  
January 19, 2025 video

Reporter Han Yeong-hye (한영혜) writes that the South Korean police have significantly intensified their investigation into allegations that the [Family Federation](#) while Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) was in a leadership position, allegedly funneled money and luxury goods to prominent politicians in exchange for political favors.

At the center of this latest development is a prolonged, 13-hour police interrogation of Jeong Won-joo (정원주), the former chief of staff to [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) – also called [Mother Han](#) – co-founder and current leader of the [Federation](#). The length and intensity of the questioning signal that authorities believe Jeong holds crucial knowledge about the financial operations of the [religious organization](#) and its alleged ties to political figures.

The interrogation was conducted on 18th December by a special task force of the National Police Agency at police headquarters in Seodaemun, Seoul. According to JoongAng Ilbo, Jeong was questioned as a witness rather than a suspect, but her stature within the [organization](#) underscores the importance of her

testimony. She previously served as vice president of Cheonmu-won, formerly the [Family Federation](#)'s highest administrative body, and is widely regarded as having been the second most powerful figure within the organizational hierarchy. Known as one of [Mother Han](#)'s closest aides, Jeong is believed to have had oversight of, or at least deep familiarity with, the [Federation](#)'s financial flows.



Jeon Jae-soo (2023)

Following the marathon questioning session, Jeong declined to answer questions from reporters. Journalists pressed her on whether the alleged transfers of money and valuables to politicians were carried out on direct instructions from [Mother Han](#) herself, and on the origins of a large cash reserve kept in a [Federation](#) vault. Jeong's silence did little to quell media speculation.

At the core of the police probe are allegations that between 2018 and 2020, Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) provided substantial cash payments and luxury watches to three senior political figures: Jeon Jae-soo (전재수), a former Minister of Oceans and Fisheries; Lim Jong-seong (임종성), a former lawmaker from the Democratic Party (민주당); and Kim Gyu-hwan (김규환), a former lawmaker from the conservative Future United Party (미래통합당). The alleged gifts, reportedly worth tens of thousands of dollars, raise serious questions under South Korea's anti-corruption laws and the Political Funds Act, which strictly regulates donations to politicians.



The proposed route for an undersea tunnel linking Japan and South Korea

Investigators are particularly focused on whether these transfers were linked to lobbying efforts connected to [Federation](#) priorities. One recurring issue is the long-standing proposal to build an [undersea tunnel](#) between South Korea and Japan, a project promoted by organizations affiliated with the [Family Federation](#). Police are examining whether financial inducements were offered to secure political support for this initiative.

Suspicion has grown as it emerged that all three politicians attended an event in 2018 related to the [undersea tunnel](#), hosted by the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP), an organization founded in 2016 under the initiative of [Mother Han](#). Further fueling concerns, former Minister Jeon reportedly continued to participate in [Federation](#)-related forums connected to the [tunnel project](#) as recently as October of this year.

Investigators have also obtained congratulatory messages sent by Jeon to [Family Federation](#) events, which they are analyzing as part of a broader effort to map the depth of his relationship with the [religious organization](#).



Yoon Yeong-ho, August 9, 2020

Another line of inquiry involves a [Federation](#)-affiliated foundation's purchase of 500 copies of Jeon's book shortly after its publication in 2019, at a cost of about 10 million won (ca. 6.800 US dollars). Police are examining whether this purchase constituted an indirect financial benefit and whether it was authorized or later reviewed by [Mother Han](#) herself.

The investigation is not limited to witnesses. On 17th December, police conducted an in-person interview with [Mother Han](#) at Seoul Detention Center, where the 82-year-old religious leader is being held since 22nd September. The officers also questioned a [Federation](#) official described as the [organization](#)'s "treasurer" to determine the origin and use of the large cache of cash allegedly kept in [Mother Han](#)'s "personal vault".

Authorities have already questioned Yoon Yeong-ho, the former

head of the [Family Federation](#)'s world headquarters, who is widely seen as the initial source of the allegations. Investigators are now cross-checking his statements against financial records, testimony from other insiders, and physical evidence obtained through search and seizure operations.



*Initiated politically charged investigation against opponent: Lee Jae-myung, President of South Korea since June 4, 2025*



*Reverend Jeon Kwang-hoon from Sarang Jeil Church (March 2024)*



*Pastor Son Hyun-bo (August 2025)*

According to the [JoongAng Ilbo article](#), these raids, carried out at the [Federation](#)'s main compound in Gapyeong and its Seoul headquarters, yielded records and receipts related to luxury goods purchases. Police are reportedly tracing the purchase of high-end watches from brands such as Bulgari or Cartier and may extend the investigation to the retail outlets involved.

Former Minister Jeon has vehemently denied the allegations. In a Facebook post, he dismissed the claims with sarcasm, stating that authorities "might as well say" he received enormous sums of cash and dozens of watches. He has also rejected the idea that he would trade political support for personal gain, emphasizing his long-standing opposition to the Korea-Japan [undersea tunnel](#) project on policy grounds. According to Jeon, the [project](#) would harm the future of the city of Busan, and he argues it is implausible that he would compromise such convictions for relatively modest personal benefits.

Analysts view the recent developments as part of a wave of political vengeance dressed up as justice, against what is perceived as conservative religious leaders with a lot of influence. Lee became president in June 2025. He soon appointed special prosecutors to investigate possible wrongdoings by the former conservative government and its supporters. On 18th July, the largest church in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, was raided by a large party of police officers investigating alleged corruption ties to the former government and unlawful political funding.

On the same day, several locations belonging to the [Family Federation](#) were raided by hundreds of police officers sent by the special prosecutors.

In July, special prosecutors raided the home and offices of another religious leader, Billy Kim (Kim Jang-hwan – 김장환), former pastor of Sanghwa Central Baptist Church and founder of the Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation. His alleged crime was illegal lobbying. The investigation is still going on.

In August, Reverend Jeon Kwang-hoon (전광훈) from the large Sarang Jeil Church was given a big fine for what was claimed to be unlawful fundraising practices at a large rally in support of former President Yoon.

And pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) from the megachurch Segyero in Busan has been held in detention since August while his alleged illegal support for the Yoon administration is being investigated.

But it certainly looks like the prosecution initiated by the current Lee administration is now [backfiring](#). As the [JoongAng Ilbo report](#) reveals, several lawmakers from Lee's own Democratic Party are being drawn into the investigations.

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HAK JA HAN JAPAN MEDIA RELIGIOUS FREEDOM COMMEMORATING VARIOUS REVIEWS

## Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking The Narrative

- December 18, 2025
- Knut Holdhus

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### Bias toward new religious movements: Why the Family Federation's finances require context, not prejudice

The South Korean daily *Segye Ilbo* carried on 17<sup>th</sup> December an opinion piece which in English would be headlined "After Faith, Is Finance the Next Target? Another Narrative Frame Around the Unification Church".

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Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): *Segye Ilbo*

The [article](#) written by religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수), points out that in recent months, the **Family Federation** – formerly the **Unification Church** – a religious movement founded in Korea but now active worldwide, has once again become the subject of public controversy in South Korea. The immediate trigger was a police search of the **Federation's** headquarters, during which authorities discovered approximately 28 billion South Korean won in cash – roughly 19 million US dollars.

Once this figure was reported in the media, it quickly became the centerpiece of public debate. Headlines and commentary focused less on the legal details of the investigation and more on a broader, emotionally charged question: why would a religious organization hold that much money at all?

For many observers, particularly those already skeptical of the **Family Federation**, the number itself seemed self-evidently problematic. Questions followed almost automatically: Is it normal for a religious group to have such financial reserves? Could this money have been used for political influence? Does the mere possession of large

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The central claim of the [article](#) is straightforward but controversial: the financial figure, taken on its own, does not justify moral outrage or suspicion. In the context of large religious organizations, 28 billion won is not an extraordinary amount. To illustrate this, the author points to more familiar examples.

The Vatican, which governs the global Catholic Church, operates on an annual budget



St. Peter's Square and the Vatican. Photo (August 2024): Zakarie Faibis / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 4.0 Int. Cropped

exceeding one trillion won – ca. 680 million US dollars.

Even within South Korea, the Jogye Order of Buddhism – the country's largest Buddhist denomination – has publicly disclosed annual operating budgets in the range of 100 billion won (ca. 68 million US dollars). In these cases, substantial financial resources are generally understood as a natural consequence of large-scale religious, cultural, and social activity.

Yet the **Family Federation** is treated differently. Its finances are often framed not as functional resources but as inherently excessive or suspicious. The article suggests that this double standard arises from how the **Federation** is perceived in Korean society. Despite its international presence, many Koreans still see the **Family Federation** as a marginal or fringe group – a “cult”, a small sect, or a religion confined to its country of origin. When such an organization is imagined as minor or illegitimate, any significant financial capacity is interpreted as inappropriate or undeserved.

This perception gap is crucial for Western readers to understand. In practice, the **Family Federation** operates far beyond the scale typically associated with small religious movements.



After delivering donations of ca. \$ 62,000 for flood victims at the end of July 2025, Seo Tae-woon, Governor of Gyeonggi County (second from the left), Lee Ki-seong, Director of the **Family Federation**'s HJ Cheonju Cheonbo Training Center and Cheonshimwon (third from the left), Kim Yeong-seok, Senior Vice President of the **Family Federation** (fourth from the left), and Park Jeong-hoon, Head of Management at Segye Ilbo (first from the left), pose for a commemorative photo. Photo: FFWPU

It functions in many countries as both a religious body and a civil society organization. Over the decades, it has organized interfaith dialogues, international peace forums, and global conferences that have drawn participation from former heads of state, diplomats, scholars, and religious leaders. It has also supported education, healthcare, and infrastructure projects in developing regions, funded scholarships and welfare programs for marginalized communities, and sponsored international awards recognizing contributions to peace. More recently, it has engaged in global discussions on climate change and sustainability.

Activities of this scope are not financed on a year-to-year basis alone. They require long-term planning, multi-year budgets, and financial reserves that can sustain projects across countries and political cycles. From this perspective, holding substantial cash assets or dedicated funds is not unusual but rather a practical necessity. [Correspondent's Jeong's article](#) emphasizes that focusing solely on the size or form of these assets, without examining how they were accumulated or used, leads to misleading conclusions.

The author also addresses a deeper ideological tension that often shapes public reactions to religious organizations. When religious groups engage actively in social or international issues, they are frequently criticized for being “too political”.





On-the-ground [Family Federation](#) volunteers in Gapyeong, South Korea after the floods 20th July 2025. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

When they withdraw from public life, they are accused of being irresponsible or indifferent to social problems. According to the [article](#), the [Family Federation](#) has consistently chosen engagement over silence, grounding its actions in a theological interpretation that emphasizes responsibility not only to individual believers but to society and the world at large. This outward-looking approach, however, has also made the [Federation](#) more visible – and therefore more vulnerable – to criticism.

At the heart of the controversy lies a confusion between two distinct issues. One is the legitimate question of legality and transparency: how funds are raised, whether donations are voluntary, and whether money is used in accordance with the law. The other is a more subjective moral judgment based purely on the amount of money involved. The [article](#) argues that these two are often deliberately conflated. If unlawful fundraising methods or expenditures are proven, criticism is justified. But absent such proof, condemning a religious organization simply for possessing large financial resources reflects prejudice rather than principled oversight.

The [article](#) ultimately poses a provocative question: what is the real problem people have with the [Family Federation](#)? Is it concrete evidence of unlawful behavior, or is it discomfort with the idea that a religion originating in Korea has grown into a global movement with significant influence and resources? Implicitly, the author suggests that the latter plays a substantial role. As long as the [Federation](#) is viewed through the lens of being a “cult” or a “minor sect”, it will be denied the legitimacy routinely granted to older or more familiar religious institutions.



A donation of 10 million won (ca. 6,800 US dollars) by the above-mentioned large Buddhist Jogye Order to Busan Metropolitan City in February 2020 to combat the Corona virus. Photo: Busan Metropolitan City. License: [Korea Open Government License](#)

The conclusion emphasizes the importance of fairness. Transparency and public accountability are essential standards for any religious organization, but they must be applied consistently and without prejudice. If the [Family Federation](#)’s funds are built through voluntary donations, they fall under protections commonly associated with freedom of religion and property rights in democratic societies. In that case, the existence of large financial reserves should not automatically invite condemnation. Instead, the debate should shift toward verifiable facts, the actual scale of the organization’s activities, and the long-term vision guiding its work.

In short, the [article](#) calls for a more rational and even-handed discussion – one that replaces emotional reactions and inherited stereotypes with contextual understanding and evidence-based judgment.

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