

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: S. Korean Regime Now Regulates Religion

Knut Holdhus
January 22, 2026



New South Korean legislation giving the state the right to police and dissolve religions. Illustration: Chat GPT



[Segye Ilbo](#)

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Current left-leaning Lee administration abandons religious neutrality pushing new legislation that gives the state powers to police and dissolve religious organizations

["Let Us Uphold the Constitution, Not Target the Unification Church"](#) was the headline of an opinion piece by religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su in the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) on 22nd January 2026.

Jeong describes how the recent debate in South Korea over a proposed law allowing for the dissolution of religious organizations has sparked controversy that extends far beyond any single faith group. While the immediate catalyst involves allegations of illegal political donations by individuals associated with the [Family Federation](#) – formerly the [Unification Church](#) – the broader issue at stake is one that will be familiar to Western audiences: how far the state can go in regulating religion without undermining constitutional freedoms.

At first glance, the issue may appear narrow and technical, or even justified. Political finance violations are taken seriously in democratic societies, and for good reason. If individuals – religious or otherwise – have broken campaign finance laws, they should be investigated and punished under the law. That principle is widely

accepted across liberal democracies. The concern raised by this article, however, is not about whether illegal conduct should be punished. It is about how that punishment is framed, targeted, and limited.

The controversy began when lawmakers introduced a bill informally labeled the "Religious Dissolution Act" (종교해산법), following allegations that members of a particular religious group had funneled money into politics unlawfully.

Matters escalated when reports suggested that the president had asked officials to examine whether religious foundations themselves could be dissolved. This immediately raised alarms about the separation of church and state and the protection of religious freedom – core constitutional principles in South

Korea, as they are in many Western democracies.



Pushing for new anti-religious legislation: President Lee Jae Myung of the Republic of Korea, October 29, 2025, at the Hilton Hotel in Gyeongju, South Korea



A constitution that guarantees freedom of religion: The Constitution of the Republic of Korea. Here, the first version enacted in 1948

increasingly influential in U.S. jurisprudence as well. Proportionality requires that government action be suitable, necessary, and the least restrictive means available. In this case, South Korea already has well-developed laws governing political finance, elections, and criminal conduct. These laws allow for investigations, prosecutions, fines, imprisonment, and restrictions on political activity, all targeted at specific individuals.



The dissolution of an entire religious organization because of unlawful acts of some of its members is an extreme measure. Here, the logo of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)

The author's central argument is that while individual wrongdoing must be addressed, it is a serious constitutional mistake to leap from allegations against individuals to questioning the legal existence of an entire religious organization. In a state governed by the rule of law, punishment is meant to be precise and proportional. Law exists to identify individual responsibility, not to express collective outrage or to dismantle institutions because of the actions of some of their members.

South Korea's Constitution, much like the U.S. Constitution or the constitutions of many European states, explicitly guarantees freedom of religion and affirms the separation of church and state. Importantly, the article clarifies that this separation does not mean religion must remain silent on social or moral issues. In Western political thought, as in South Korea, separation of church and state traditionally means that government power should not interfere in religious belief, organization, or internal affairs. It is meant to restrain the state, not to muzzle religious voices.

What troubles the author is that recent discussions appear to reverse this logic. Under the proposed approach, the state would evaluate religious speech and activity, label certain actions as "political" or "harmful to the public interest", and then use that judgment as grounds for dissolving a religious organization. From a constitutional perspective, this is a dangerous shift. Rather than keeping government out of religion, it places religion under government supervision.

Legal experts in South Korea have echoed these concerns. Unlike countries such as the United States or Japan, South Korea does not have a comprehensive legal framework governing religious organizations. Dissolving a legal entity under existing civil law requires extremely strict conditions, and actual cases are exceedingly rare. Introducing a new legal mechanism specifically aimed at dissolving religious bodies would therefore mark a significant expansion of state power into an area traditionally protected from such intrusion.

One of the most serious constitutional problems identified in the article is the violation of the principle of proportionality – a concept familiar to constitutional courts across Europe and

Given this existing legal toolkit, enabling the dissolution of an entire religious organization represents the most extreme possible sanction. The author argues that this clearly violates the principle of minimal intrusion. Punishing an entire faith community for the alleged crimes of individuals also undermines a foundational legal norm: that responsibility is personal, not collective.

The potential consequences of such a law extend beyond legal theory. The [article](#) warns of a chilling effect on religious life more broadly. Religious organizations may begin to self-censor, avoiding public discussion of morally sensitive issues – such as family policy, bioethics, or anti-discrimination laws – out of fear that their statements could be interpreted as improper political intervention. This concern will resonate with Western readers familiar with debates over whether religious institutions should be allowed to speak openly on contentious public issues.

There is also the risk of selective enforcement. If the power to dissolve religious organizations exists, its application may vary

depending on the political orientation of the government in power. This is not merely a religious freedom issue; it could easily spill over into the broader nonprofit and civil society sector, weakening the independence of organizations meant to serve as a check on state authority.

Notably, the [article](#) highlights reactions within South Korea's Christian community. While public responses have been restrained, there is significant private concern. This concern is not rooted in sympathy for the [Family Federation](#) itself. Rather, it reflects an understanding that once the state claims the authority to dissolve religious organizations, that power is unlikely to remain confined to one unpopular or controversial group. Today it may be one religion; tomorrow it could be another faith, or even a secular civic organization.

The author concludes by reframing the issue in stark terms. This is not about defending a particular religion. It is about defending constitutional boundaries. Unlawful acts should be punished through existing laws, and religious institutions should remain under the protection of constitutional guarantees. In a democratic republic, the temptation to sacrifice foundational principles for short-term political satisfaction must be resisted. What is truly at risk, the author argues, is not the fate of one religious organization, but the integrity of the constitutional order itself.

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Upbringing No Excuse As Abe Assassin Gets Life

- January 21, 2026
- Knut Holdhus

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Yamagami sentenced to life for 2022 Abe assassination; Court rejects defense arguments that upbringing affected the terrorist's decision-making



Tokyo, 21st January 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

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Influence," Nara District Court

[See editor's note below on the above headline]

Assassination of Former Prime Minister Abe: Defendant Tetsuya Yamagami Sentenced to Life Imprisonment

by editorial staff of *Sekai Nippo*

In the trial of Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也 – 45), charged with murder and other offenses in the July 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), a lay judge panel delivered its verdict on 21st January at the *Nara District Court*. Presiding Judge Shinichi Tanaka (田中伸一) sentenced Yamagami to life imprisonment, in line with the prosecution's request.

See also [Murder of Abe Was Terrorism – Trial Must Say So](#)

There was no dispute over the main facts of the indictment, including the murder charge, and the central issue in the trial was sentencing. The defense had argued that even a severe sentence should be limited to 20 years in prison.

The prosecution emphasized the dangerous nature of the crime. While acknowledging that family discord arose after Yamagami's mother made large donations to the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), the prosecutors criticized his motive for targeting Abe, stating that there was "no room for leniency."



Tetsuya Yamagami, sentenced for the assassination of Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan. Photo: Andrew2592009 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int. Cropped](#)



A floral tribute stand set up at Osaka Gokoku Shrine on 6th July 2024, on the occasion of the second anniversary of the death of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Organized by the Itagaki Taisuke Memorial Association. Photo: Photo memories 1868 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#)

defendant had an unfortunate upbringing, there was a "logical leap" in connecting it to the course of the crime. He stated that the act was "entirely the result of the defendant's own decision" and that it could not be said that his upbringing influenced his decision-making. He added that there were "no circumstances warranting substantial leniency".

The trial began in October last year, during which 12 witnesses testified, including Diet members who were at the scene, police officers, and the defendant's mother and sister. Questioning of the defendant himself spanned five days.

According to the indictment, the defendant shot and killed Abe with a homemade pipe gun while Abe was giving a campaign speech in support of an upper house election candidate in Nara City. In addition to murder, he was charged with four other offenses: violation of the *Firearm and Sword Possession Control*

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Judge Tanaka pointed out that although the

Law, violation of the *Weapons Manufacturing Act*, violation of the *Explosives Control Act*, and damage to a building, for a total of five charges.

The **religious organization** has not issued any comment regarding the verdict.

See also [Murder of Abe Was Terrorism – Trial Must Say So](#)

Featured image above: **Nara District Court** in Nara, Nara prefecture, Japan. Photo (2007): 663highland / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp](#)

[Editor's note: The quoted text in the headline highlights the court's rejection of the defense argument that the defendant's background mitigated responsibility.]

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