

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Korea's Troubling Precedent of Selective Probes

Knut Holdhus
January 26, 2026



Imbalanced justice in South Korea. Illustration: Chat GPT

朝鮮日報

The logo of the Chosun Ilbo

Uneven justice? South Korea's church-politics probes raise questions of a disturbing pattern of lack of prosecutorial balance

The latest developments surrounding South Korea's investigations into alleged church-politics collusion have reignited a familiar and sensitive debate: whether the country's law-enforcement institutions apply the same standards of urgency and rigor to all political actors, regardless of party affiliation.

At the center of this controversy is an apparent asymmetry. Allegations involving members of the ruling Democratic Party (DPK) appear to be languishing with little tangible progress, while probes touching the main opposition People Power Party (PPP) are advancing rapidly and aggressively. For many observers, this contrast raises uncomfortable questions about prosecutorial discretion, political influence, and institutional credibility.



Jeon Jae-soo (2023)

The large daily newspaper Chosun Ilbo published on 26th January a report headlined "[Police Probe Into 'Unification Church Case' Stalls ... Jeon Jae-soo Prepares to Run for Busan Mayor](#)". The article highlights the above-mentioned concern through the case of Democratic Party lawmaker Jeon Jae-soo (전재수).

Police have been investigating allegations that Jeon received tens of millions of won in cash and valuables from figures associated with the [Family Federation](#) - formerly the Unification Church - allegedly in exchange for political favors, between 2018 and 2020. Despite the seriousness of the accusations - and despite the fact that the statute of limitations for certain offenses is close to expiring - the investigation has shown little substantive movement nearly two months after it formally began. This inertia stands in stark contrast to the speed and intensity of parallel investigations involving the PPP.

The Jeon Jae-soo case resurfaced after a delayed disclosure that a special prosecutor team, originally tasked with examining alleged lobbying by the [Family Federation](#) toward the PPP, had uncovered testimony implicating not only opposition figures but also lawmakers affiliated with the Democratic Party.

According to testimony given in August of last year by Yoon Yeong-ho, a former senior official of the [Family Federation](#), large sums of money and valuables were allegedly delivered to Jeon, former Democratic Party lawmaker Lim Jong-seong (임종성), and former Future United Party lawmaker Kim Gyu-hwan (김규환). Yet despite this testimony, no investigative action was taken for more than four months.



Yoon Yeong-ho, here 9th August 2020



Former Democratic Party lawmaker Lim Jong-seon (2019)

The special prosecutor later argued that allegations involving Democratic Party figures fell outside the statutory scope of the special counsel's mandate and were therefore transferred to the police. While this explanation may be procedurally defensible, critics note that the practical consequence was a significant delay - one that now risks rendering the case moot if statutes of limitation expire. Jeon resigned from his ministerial post and was questioned once as a suspect in December, but since then, investigators have reportedly confined themselves largely to digital forensic analysis, without further interrogations or summonses of other implicated figures.

This lack of urgency becomes particularly striking when viewed alongside Jeon's political behavior. Far from retreating from public life, he has begun openly preparing a bid for mayor of Busan, South Korea's second-largest city. He has publicly discussed his expected declaration date, flooded the city with campaign banners, and scheduled appearances at high-profile political events. Within Korean political culture, such actions are often interpreted as a signal that a politician believes legal risks are either manageable or already neutralized. For critics, this reinforces the perception that the investigation has lost momentum at a crucial moment.

By contrast, prosecutors' handling of allegations involving the Shincheonji Church [See editor's note below] and the People Power Party has been markedly different. In that case, prosecutors have moved swiftly to secure testimony suggesting that tens of thousands of Shincheonji members were mobilized to join the PPP en masse between 2021 and 2023. Former regional leaders of the church have reportedly provided detailed accounts, enrollment targets, and even lists of individual party members. Prosecutors are now preparing compulsory measures, including large-scale search-and-seizure operations, to expand the probe.

To a Western audience, this disparity may appear puzzling, but it is rooted in several features of South Korea's political and

institutional landscape. First, the country has a long history of politicized prosecution. For decades, prosecutors were widely seen as aligned with conservative governments; in recent years, progressive administrations have sought to rebalance that power, sometimes resulting in perceptions - fair or not - that prosecutorial zeal now disproportionately targets conservatives. Each shift in political power tends to be accompanied by accusations that law enforcement has become an instrument of partisan accountability rather than neutral justice.



The Shincheonji Peace Palace in Cheongpyeong-myeon, on the same lake where the [Family Federation](#) has large facilities, in Gapyeong, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea (2020)

Second, South Korea's legal system grants prosecutors and police significant discretion in pacing investigations, prioritizing cases, and determining when to deploy coercive measures. While such discretion exists in most democracies, it becomes controversial in highly polarized environments where timing can shape electoral outcomes. An investigation that accelerates before an election can be politically devastating; one that stalls until statutes of limitation expire can be politically absolving.

Third, religious organizations like the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji [See editor's note below] occupy a uniquely sensitive position in

Korean society. They are often viewed with suspicion by the media, and allegations of political collusion tend to provoke strong public reactions. When investigations appear selective - aggressive in one direction, cautious in another - it reinforces suspicions that legal standards are being applied unevenly

depending on which political faction stands to benefit.

From this perspective, the issue is not merely whether Jeon Jae-soo is guilty or whether the PPP benefited improperly from Shincheonji's [See editor's note below] actions. Rather, it is whether South Korea's justice system can convincingly demonstrate that similar allegations trigger similar investigative responses, regardless of who holds power. For a democracy that prides itself on hard-won institutional reforms and public accountability, the appearance of differential treatment risks eroding trust not only in prosecutors and police, but in the political system as a whole.

In that sense, the [Chosun Ilbo article](#) is less about one stalled investigation than about a broader pattern that many Koreans - and increasingly foreign observers - find troubling: when justice moves quickly in one direction and hesitates in another, explanations grounded solely in procedure may no longer suffice.

See also [Turning Journalism into Moral Storytelling](#)

See also [Korea: Distortions Refuted in Statement to Media](#)

See also [When Special Prosecutors Become Political Tools](#)

See also [Religion Between Engagement and Withdrawal](#)

See also [Climate of Suspicion: Peace Reframed as Politics](#)

See also [Korea: Can Religion and Politics Be Disentangled?](#)

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.]

See also [Some Religions Are Welcome in Politics, Some Not](#)

See also [Fact-Based Clarification of Media Misreporting](#)

See also [President's Own Party Drawn into Lobbying Claims](#)

See also [Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking the Narrative](#)

See also [Balcomb: "Prosecutors' Case Is Politically Driven"](#)

See also [Likely Long Legal Battle Ahead for Mother Han](#)

See also [Bail Hearing with Mother Han's Spiritual Message](#)

See also [Trial Day 1: Mother Han Denies All Allegations](#)

See also [Asia Today Editorial: "Avoid Detention of Clergy!"](#)

See also [Complaint Filed Against Lead Special Prosecutor](#)

See also [SKorea's Polarization Shapes Views of Mother Han](#)

See also [Inside the Detention Center: A 10-Minute Visit](#)

See also [Health Concerns: 82-Year-Old Pretrial Detainee](#)

See also [In Tiny Solitary Cell: Irreversible Harm Caused](#)

See also [Mother Han Briefly Released for Medical Reasons](#)

See also [Message of Religious Unity from Detention Cell](#)

See also [Over 50 Days in Vigil Outside Detention Center](#)

Related to troubling pattern: [Mother Han's December Trial: Long Detention Ahead](#)

Also related to troubling pattern: [A 10-Minute Visit to Mother Han in Detention](#)

Also related to troubling pattern: [Denying Allegations: Hak Ja Han \(82\) in Inquiry](#)

Also related to troubling pattern: [SKorean Court's Sharp Criticism of Prosecutors](#)

And also related to troubling pattern: [Detention: Harsh Cell Conditions Spark Outcry](#)

More, related to troubling pattern: [Ugly: Arrest Warrant Sought for Hak Ja Han \(82\)](#)

And more, related to troubling pattern: [Critics Warn of "Authoritarian Drift" in SKorea](#)

Even more, related to troubling pattern: [Court Decision to Prolong Detention Condemned](#)

Still more, related to troubling pattern: [Co-Founder, 82, Questioned 9 Hours by Prosecutors](#)

Also related to troubling pattern: [Democratic Party's Assault on Family Federation](#)

And even more, related to troubling pattern: [Mother Han \(82\) in Poor Health in Damp, Cold Cell](#)

And still more, related to troubling pattern: [Korean Crisis: "True Democracy Must Serve Heaven"](#)

And yet more, related to troubling pattern: [Faith Leaders Protest State Assault on Religion](#)

Also related to troubling pattern: [News Release Blasts Indictment of Hak Ja Han, 82](#)

More, related to troubling pattern: [70 Years On: Detention History Repeats Itself](#)

And more, related to troubling pattern: [Trump Raises Alarm Over Church Raids in Korea](#)

Even more, related to troubling pattern: [Mike Pompeo Calls Probe of Co-Founder "Lawfare"](#)

Still more, related to troubling pattern: [Korean Faith Crackdown: USA Urged to Confront It](#)

Yet more, related to troubling pattern: [Korean Bribery Scandal: Media Clears Federation](#)

And also related to troubling pattern: [Raids Blur Line Between Justice and Politics](#)

More, related to troubling pattern: [Heavy-Handed Raid on Sacred Sites Condemned](#)



Justice Rendered, Questions Remain In Abe Murder

- January 25, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



Shinzo Abe assassination verdict raises questions about the defendant's "leap" as its cause remain unexplained

Tokyo, 23rd January 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

The Background Behind the "Leap" Must Be Clarified

Verdict in the Assassination of Shinzo Abe

by the editorial board of *Sekai Nippo*

See also [Court Rejects Media Narrative in Yamagami Case](#)

See also [Upbringing No Excuse as Abe Assassin Gets Life](#)

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

In the case in which former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) was shot and killed in July 2022 while campaigning in Nara City, the Nara District Court



Logo of the *Sekai Nippo*

Share: f t w i e

- More Posts
- S. Korea's Troubling Pattern Of Selective Probes
January 26, 2026
 - Court Rejects Media Narrative In Yamagami Case
January 24, 2026
 - Korea: Distortions Refuted In Statement To Media
January 23, 2026
 - New S. Korean Laws Let State Police Religions
January 22, 2026
 - Upbringing No Excuse As Abe Assassin Gets Life
January 21, 2026
 - Turning Journalism Into Moral Storytelling
January 19, 2026
 - South Korean Drama: A Scarf And A Tie Too Much
January 17, 2026

Search:

Categories

Send us a message

First Name * Last Name

Email *

Your Message *

sentenced
Tetsuya
Yamagami (山上
徹也), who was
charged with
murder and
other crimes, to
life
imprisonment, as sought by prosecutors.



Positional relationship between **former prime minister Shinzo Abe and the shooter Tetsuya Yamagami** on his assassination. Sourced from *Nikkei.com*. Photo: *Asanagi / Wikimedia Commons*. License: *CC CC0 1.0 UPDD*

Submit

The central point of contention was how much weight should be given in sentencing to the defendant's disadvantaged upbringing, which stemmed from his mother's involvement in the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). The court's conclusion that his upbringing "cannot be said to have had a significant impact on the occurrence of the incident" is an appropriate judgment.

No Significant Impact of Upbringing Recognized



Shinzo Abe in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated. Photo: United States Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel / Wikimedia Commons. Public domain image. Cropped

At the same time, the defendant's act – attacking Shinzo Abe with a homemade firearm during a campaign speech in support of a House of Councillors election – shook the very foundations of democracy. By killing Abe, whom the defendant himself described as "not the real target", he sought to shock society, provoke criticism of the [religious organization](#), and "strike back" at it. This act can be described as nothing other than terrorism. While the ruling did judge the crime as a heinous murder, it cannot be said to have fully confronted its essential nature as a terrorist act.

During the trial, the defense called the defendant's family members and scholars of religion as witnesses, arguing that the mother's conversion to the former [Unification Church](#) and her large financial donations constituted "religious abuse" of her children, and sought leniency in sentencing.

Regarding the defendant's upbringing, the court acknowledged that it had "significant disadvantaged aspects", stating,

"It is not impossible to understand that the defendant, having been deeply shaken by his brother's suicide, saw the complex emotions he harbored toward the [religious organization](#) turn into intense anger."

However, the court continued,

"There must be said to have been a major leap between that and the decision to commit murder and to plan and carry out the manufacture of a homemade firearm."

Therefore, the court concluded,

"The influence of his upbringing cannot be recognized as substantial."

As for the decision to change the target from senior [church](#) officials to Shinzo Abe, the court found,

"Ultimately, the defendant decided to carry out the attack by prioritizing his own circumstances – namely, his worsening financial situation and his belief that he could not wait any longer."

It further stated that even this "shortsighted and self-centered decision-making process cannot be regarded as having been significantly influenced by the disadvantages of his upbringing."



The scene of the assassination of Shinzo Abe in front of Yamato-Saidaiji Station in Nara City, Japan. Photo: (撮影) 一般社団法人板垣退助先生顕彰会 (アップロード) / Wikimedia Commons. License: *CC ASA 4.0 Int. Cropped*

From the outset, the incident was investigated and prosecuted as a lone-wolf crime by Yamagami. During the trial, the defense did not dispute the facts, and the defendant himself admitted them. Nevertheless, various doubts remain regarding the theory that he acted entirely alone. There is a major discrepancy between the assessment by Dr. Hidetada Fukushima (福島英賢) of *Nara Medical University Hospital*, who treated Shinzo Abe and reported severe damage to the heart, and the findings of the subsequent judicial autopsy conducted by the Nara Prefectural Police. There is also information suggesting that the fatal bullet was never recovered.

See also ["Organized Terrorism, Not Lone Wolf, Killed Abe"](#)

See also [Lone-Wolf Theory Disputed in Abe Assassination](#)

These are not so-called "conspiracy theories," but reasonable questions. It was hoped that they would be clarified during the trial. However, only the forensic pathologist

testified, and Dr. Fukushima was not called as a witness. Rather than dispelling doubts, the proceedings can be said to have deepened them.

Target Changed Five Days Before the Incident

The defendant had originally gone so far as to incur debt in order to manufacture a homemade firearm to attack senior figures of the **religious organization**. The decision to change the target to Abe – whom he had originally regarded as “not an enemy” – and to begin acting on that decision was made just five days before the crime.

Here, too, there was a major “leap”. Was economic hardship alone truly the reason for that leap? It cannot be assumed that the defendant has told the whole truth. Clarifying the background behind this leap is essential.

See also [Court Rejects Media Narrative in Yamagami Case](#)

See also [Upbringing No Excuse as Abe Assassin Gets Life](#)

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

Featured image above: Tetsuya Yamagami given life sentence. Illustration: Chat GPT 25th January 2026.

Related to questions remain: [Abe Murder 3-Year Trial Delay: Calls for Truth](#)

Also related to questions remain: [Lone-Wolf Theory Disputed in Abe Assassination](#)

Also related to questions remain: [“Organized Terrorism, Not Lone Wolf, Killed Abe”](#)

Also related to questions remain: [Media Helping Terrorist Reach His Goal](#)

Also related to questions remain: [Kishida Administration Giving in to Terrorism](#)

And also related to questions remain: [Kishida Has Opened Can of Worms](#)

More, related to questions remain: [Aiding Terrorist, Media Bashes Minority Religion](#)

And more, related to questions remain: [Bizarre Atlantic Report Condoning Terror](#)

Still more, related to questions remain: [Japan Times: Warning of Terror](#)

Yet more, related to questions remain: [Did constant hate-mongering cause terror?](#)

Even more, related to questions remain: [Inhuman Government-Supported Mass Deprogramming](#)

More, related to questions remain: [Collusion to Rob Minority of Its Rights](#)

And more, related to questions remain: [State and Media Creating “Today’s Non-Citizens”](#)

Still more, related to questions remain: [Japan Criticized for Glaring Rights Violations](#)

Even more, related to questions remain: [Japan Following the Way of China](#)

And still more, related to questions remain: [12 Religious Freedom NGOs Denouncing Japan](#)

And even more, related to questions remain: [Conference on Religious Freedom Violations](#)

Still more, related to questions remain: [Japan: Threat to Religious Freedom](#)

Even more, related to questions remain: [Call to End Witch Hunt](#)

More, related to questions remain: [Government’s Foul Play Pointed Out](#)

More, related to questions remain: [Japan: 4300 Abductions and Forcible Detentions](#)

And more, related to questions remain: [Illegalities of Activist Lawyers Exposed](#)

Yet more, related to questions remain: [Lawyers Manipulating, Coercing, Lying](#)

Still more, related to questions remain: [Biased Information from Leftwing Lawyers](#)

Even more, related to questions remain: [Dangerous Precedent to Crush Religions](#)

Even more, related to questions remain: [Kyodo News: 100s of Rights Violations Claimed](#)

Even more, related to questions remain: [Fabricated Torts Part of Wily Strategy in Japan](#)

And even more, related to unexplained matters remain: [Yamagami Trial: Peril of Romanticizing Terror](#)

Even more, related to unexplained matters remain: [Social Media, Reporting Cited as Fueling Terror](#)

Even more, related to unexplained matters remain: [Selective Justice: Special Law Against One Faith](#)

Even more, related to unexplained matters remain: [Lawfare: State Uses Legal System in War on Faith](#)

First Name Last Name

Your Email Address

I agree to receive your newsletter and other promotional emails from you.

Follow us

