

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: 7,000 S Koreans Protest Anti-Religion Law

Knut Holdhus
April 2, 2026



From the demonstration in front of the national parliament in Seoul, S Korea, April 1, 2026

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su of [Segye Ilbo](#)

South Korean demonstrators protesting expanded state powers over religion as 7,000 believers gather in front of national parliament

The South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) published on 1st April a [report](#) by religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) about a large public demonstration the same day in Seoul.

See also [South Korea's Slide Toward Authoritarianism](#)

The event drew significant attention to an ongoing debate about religious freedom and state authority in South Korea. The demonstration, attended by an estimated 7,000 persons according to organizers, was organized primarily by Protestant Christian groups who are opposing a proposed amendment to the Civil Act - commonly referred to by critics as the "Religious Corporation Dissolution Bill". The gathering was held outside the National Assembly building in Yeouido, the political heart of the country, underscoring the seriousness with which participants view the issue.

The proposed legislation would grant the government expanded authority to dissolve religious organizations under certain

conditions. The current left-leaning Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration that has introduced the bill argue that it is necessary to address controversial or what they call "harmful" religious groups. However, critics - including those at the rally - believe the law is overly broad and could open the door to state interference in religious life. They fear that it may not only target fringe or widely criticized groups, but could ultimately be applied to mainstream religious institutions as well.

The [Segye Ilbo](#) reports that at the demonstration, participants expressed their concerns through speeches, placards, and chants. Many carried signs accusing the bill of undermining constitutional rights, particularly the freedom of religion and protection of property. Some slogans suggested that the

legislation could function as a "gag law", silencing religious communities by giving the state excessive power to shut them down. Others argued that the bill is being justified under the pretext of regulating specific controversial groups, such as Shincheonji or [Unificationism](#), but in reality poses a broader threat to all religious organizations.



Jo Bae-sook September 7, 2023

The presence of political figures added weight to the event. Among them was Jo Bae-sook (조배숙), a sitting lawmaker from the conservative People Power Party, who publicly criticized the bill. She argued that any law must be consistent with the constitution and reflect universal democratic values. In her view, the proposed amendment risks violating both religious freedom and property rights - two principles that are strongly protected under South Korean law.

Religious leaders who spoke at the rally framed the issue not just as a legal or political matter, but as a broader societal concern.

Pastor Kim Un-seong (김운성) of Yeongnak Church (영락교회) described the bill as a seemingly small step that could have far-reaching consequences, likening it to a seed that might grow into something much more expansive and potentially harmful. He

emphasized that internal religious issues - such as disputes over doctrine or the classification of certain groups as heretical - should be handled within the religious sphere, rather than through government intervention.

Another speaker, Pastor Lee Tae-hee (이태희) of Jinri Church (진리교회), drew on international examples to illustrate the risks of increased state control over religion. He argued that in China, government oversight of religious organizations began with administrative measures but gradually expanded to include control over teachings and sermons. Such developments, he warned, demonstrate how easily regulatory frameworks can evolve into mechanisms for deeper interference in matters of belief and conscience.



Pastor Kim Un-seong of Yeongnak Church speaking at the demonstration in Seoul April 1, 2026

References to global cases were a recurring theme throughout the event. Speakers pointed to countries like China and Russia, where religious regulation has been criticized as a tool for political control. Germany was also mentioned as an example of a country that, after experiencing the negative consequences of such policies, moved away from them in the postwar period. These comparisons were intended to highlight what protesters see as a potential slippery slope: once the state gains the authority to regulate religious organizations extensively, it may gradually expand that authority in ways that erode fundamental freedoms.

The principle of separation of church and state was another key point of contention. Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of Segyero Church (세계로교회) in Busan argued that the proposed law reverses this principle

by allowing the state to intervene directly in religious affairs. He warned that, if passed, the law could enable the government not only to dissolve religious institutions but also to seize their assets, raising concerns about abuse of power. He and others stressed that religious freedom is not merely a policy preference but a constitutional right that must be protected.



Pastor Son Hyun-bo, August 2025

Historical references also played a role in shaping the narrative of the protest. Some speakers invoked the 1st March Independence Movement of 1919, during which religious leaders were prominent in resisting Japanese colonial rule. By drawing this parallel, they framed the current situation as part of a longer tradition of religious communities standing up against perceived injustice. In this context, opposing the bill was presented not only as a defense of faith, but as a broader civic responsibility tied to national identity and the protection of future generations.

According to the [Segye Ilbo report](#), the rally concluded with Pastor Choi Kang-hee (최강희) of Happy Church (행복한교회) reading a formal statement that outlined the protesters' main objections to the bill. Among the concerns listed were provisions that could allow government investigations and oversight without judicial warrants, the potential confiscation of religious organizations' assets upon dissolution, and vague criteria for

determining what constitutes inappropriate political involvement by religious groups. Critics argue that such ambiguities could lead to arbitrary or inconsistent enforcement.

The statement also challenged the framing of the bill as a targeted measure against specific controversial groups. Instead, it described the legislation as a comprehensive regulatory framework that could apply to all religious organizations, effectively placing them under administrative control. This, the protesters highlighted, represents a fundamental shift in how religion is treated by the state - from an independent sphere of civil society to an object of government oversight.

Organizers made clear that this demonstration is unlikely to be the last. They indicated plans to continue holding rallies and to build broader coalitions, potentially involving other religious traditions such as Catholicism and Buddhism, as well as civil society groups. Their goal is to maintain public pressure until the bill is withdrawn or significantly revised.

The 1st April rally reflects an important development in South Korea after the current Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration introduced measures to regulate religious groups and even dissolve them. While the outcome of the proposed legislation remains uncertain, the scale and intensity of the opposition suggest that it will remain a contentious issue in the country's political and social landscape.

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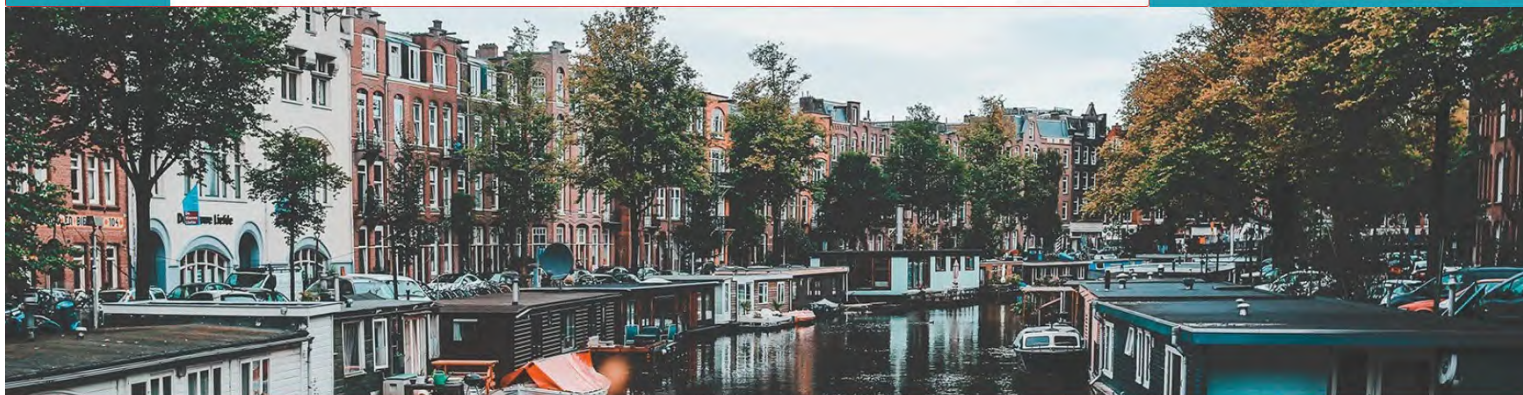
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Tokyo, 27th March 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).



Logo of the *Sekai Nippo*

The Organization Must Address the Issue of Coercive Faith-Breaking (Forced Renunciation of Faith)

Dissolution Order Against the Family Federation

by Yoichiro Miyata (宮田陽一郎), head of the editorial and commentary department of *Sekai Nippo*

On 4th March, the *Tokyo High Court* issued a [decision](#) in the [immediate appeal](#) regarding the request for a dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), upholding the [dissolution order](#) handed down by the *Tokyo District Court* in March of last year.



Placed under the control of a liquidator: Here, one of 260 closed [Family Federation](#) churches, this one in Chiryu, Aichi Prefecture, Japan. Photo: HQA02330 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#). Edited by Copilot adding “No entry” ribbon.

As a result, the [Family Federation](#) has lost its status as a religious corporation, and [liquidation procedures](#) have begun. Churches across the country have been placed under the control of a liquidator, and believers are currently unable to come and go.

Since the 2009 compliance declaration [[See editor’s note 1 below](#)], damage caused by donation-related issues within the [Family Federation](#) has decreased sharply. Nevertheless, the [High Court](#) piled inference upon inference and rejected the [immediate appeal](#), stating that the “possibility” of unlawful acts could not be denied. It must be said that this is an unjust decision, far removed from the principle of adjudication based on evidence. It is only natural that the [Family Federation](#) has filed a [special appeal](#) with the Supreme Court.

Previously, the requirement under the *Religious Corporations Act* for issuing a dissolution order – “acts that clearly violate laws and significantly harm public welfare” – had been limited to criminal cases. However, following the July 2022 shooting of former Prime Minister

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Following the July 2022 shooting of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), and amid opposition parties' pursuit of alleged "ties" to the **Family Federation**, the then-Kishida administration made a stopgap but significant **reinterpretation**, stating that "civil torts could also be included" in the requirements. Considering that this led to the **High Court's decision**, it can be said that Japan's "rule of law" is being seriously shaken.

Regarding the **High Court decision**, the *Japanese Communist Party's* newspaper *Shimbun Akahata* featured the headline on its front page on 5th March: "Unification Church: High Court Also Orders Dissolution" and "Immediate Appeal Rejected; Liquidation Procedures to Begin". The article also quoted Secretary-General Akira Koike (小池晃), who commented:

"Thanks to the truly tremendous efforts of the victims and their legal team over many years, this represents major progress in the form of a dissolution order."

The **Family Federation**, together with its affiliated organization the *International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC)*, has strongly criticized communism, which denies the existence of **God**. For this reason, the Communist Party has historically regarded both groups as enemies.

In particular, the Communist Party openly displayed hostility after its supported candidate lost the Kyoto gubernatorial election in April 1978, bringing an end to 28 years of progressive prefectural administration. During that election campaign, the *International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC)* sharply criticized then-Communist Party Chairman Kenji Miyamoto (宮本顕治) over a prewar "lynching murder incident" [See editor's note 2 below], contributing to the party's defeat. Afterward, Miyamoto declared,

"Leading the effort to eliminate the Federation for Victory Over Communism will be recorded in history as a 'holy struggle'."

Meanwhile, in relation to the **Family Federation**, there were numerous cases in which believers were **abducted and confined** by opposing groups and pressured to renounce their faith. Since 1966, more than **4,300 believers** have reportedly been confined. Particularly between 1978 and 1986, there were successive cases in which believers were **forcibly hospitalized** in psychiatric institutions, some of which were affiliated with communist groups.

Additionally, when the *Federation for Victory Over Communism* promoted a movement in the 1980s to



For *mass deprogramming*: **Akira Koike**, 30th March 2023. Photo: 首相官邸ホームページ / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int.](#) Cropped



Kenji Miyamoto (宮本顕治 - 1908-2007), chairman of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) 1958-1977. Photo (August 1955): 朝日新聞社 / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#). Cropped

enact an anti-espionage law, left-wing groups including the Communist Party launched a “spiritual sales” campaign to block it. Lawyers with close ties to the Communist Party formed the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales*.

Relatives of believers, alarmed by media reports about “spiritual sales”, consulted with Christian pastors opposed to the **Family Federation**, which led to an increase in **abductions and confinement** cases. **Toru Goto**, who was confined for **12 years and 5 months**, was one such individual, held in a condominium room by family members, pastors, and professional deprogrammers.



Toru Goto, member of **Family Federation** held captive for 12 years and 5 months by his own family and professional faith-breakers who attempted to break his faith. Photo: **FOREF**. Published with permission

On the other hand, the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* actively pursued the “destruction of the **Family Federation**”, including supporting lawsuits for damages filed by former believers who had renounced their faith. These legal battles have, in part, influenced the dissolution order.

Criticizing the **Family Federation** is a matter of freedom. However, forcing believers to renounce their faith tramples on the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion and is absolutely unacceptable. The **Family Federation** must communicate to the public that such issues lie behind the dissolution order.

Featured image above: Scene from video with actors enacting a deprogramming (faith-breaking) [See editor's note 3 below] story from real life in Japan. In this scene, a young man is being abducted by his family and relatives in league with and guided by professional faith-breakers to be brought to a secret location where he will be locked up and subjected to coercive faith-breaking (deprogramming) [See editor's note 3 below]. More than **4,300 members** of the **Family Federation** in Japan became victims of such inhuman violations of human rights, but the police and authorities turned a blind eye to it. Screenshot from video by the **National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Conversion**.

[Editor's note 1: The **2009 compliance declaration** of the Unification Church of Japan (now the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**) was a formal commitment by the organization to reform its practices in response to longstanding public criticism and legal challenges.

The **Unification Church** in Japan had faced numerous allegations related to recruitment tactics and donation solicitation, termed “spiritual sales” (靈感商法) by a hostile network of activist lawyers who had declared the **religious organization** an enemy. These issues led to multiple lawsuits orchestrated by the activist lawyers and significant media backlash. This prompted the **organization** to take measures to restore its reputation and demonstrate compliance with legal and ethical standards.

The **religious organization** pledged to stop possibly unethical donation practices, including what the hostile network of lawyers claimed amounted to “pressuring members into making large financial contributions under spiritual pretexts.”

This was in response to accusations from the same activist lawyers that followers “were being manipulated into giving away substantial amounts of money or property.”

The **Unification Church** stated it would enhance internal oversight to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards. Measures included better training for leaders and stricter guidelines for evangelization and solicitation of donations.

After this compliance declaration, there was a significant decrease in the number of lawsuits against the **Unification Church** – since 2015 called the **Family Federation**. The **religious organization** has used this as evidence that it has improved its practices and should not be subject to **dissolution**.]

[Editor's note 2: The “**lynching murder case**” (リンチ殺人事件) refers to what is commonly known in Japan as the *Japanese Communist Party* lynching incident.

In 1933, during Japan’s prewar period of intense political repression, members of the underground *Japanese Communist Party* abducted and interrogated a fellow party member they suspected of being a police informant. The victim, Takiji Kobayashi (note: the exact victim often cited is party member *Yoshio Yamamoto* or similar depending on sources), was beaten and tortured during internal questioning. He subsequently died from the abuse, making it effectively an internal “purge killing.”

The incident became a long-standing political liability for the Communist Party. Decades later, critics – especially anti-communist groups – used it to argue that the party had a history of violent internal discipline.

Kenji Miyamoto, who later became a prominent leader of the party, was accused of involvement in the incident as a young activist. Miyamoto denied direct responsibility, and the Communist Party has maintained that the accusations were exaggerated or politically motivated.

However, anti-communist organizations have repeatedly highlighted the case as evidence against the party.]

[Editor's note 3: Coercive faith-breaking

(“deprogramming”) in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the **Family Federation** or Jehovah’s Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.



Also subject to faith-breaking attempts: Members of **Soka Gakkai**. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp](#). Cropped

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has

occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to “rescue” the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about “mental health” or alleged “exploitation” as mitigating factors.]

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