

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's Slide Toward Communist Dictatorship

Knut Holdhus
April 3, 2026



Lee Jae-myung and fellow politicians from the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) July 10, 2024



Canadian political commentator William Barclay issues warning on rapid and alarming slide toward becoming a state where longstanding democratic norms are being systematically dismantled

Under the headline "[President Lee - Asia's newest dictator](#)", political commentator William Barclay in his 1st April 2026 [opinion column](#) for Western Standard, the Calgary-based online news and opinion publication, presents a forceful and highly critical interpretation of recent political developments in South Korea under President Lee Jae-myung (이재명).



South Korea's slide toward authoritarianism through judicial reforms. Illustration ChatGPT

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Barclay's central thesis is unambiguous: he argues that South Korea, long regarded as a stable and vibrant democracy, is undergoing a rapid and alarming democratic decline driven by Lee's leadership and the actions of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK). The column frames these developments not as routine political disputes or reforms, but as evidence of systemic authoritarian consolidation.

Barclay begins by focusing on a set of judicial reforms enacted on 5th March 2026, which officially aim to expand constitutional oversight and increase accountability within the judiciary. These measures include provisions allowing constitutional appeals of Supreme Court decisions, disciplining judges for perceived distortions of legal principles, and enlarging the composition of the top court.

While such reforms could be interpreted as structural adjustments within a democratic framework, Barclay contends that their underlying purpose is far more strategic and troubling. In his view, they represent an attempt by President Lee to subordinate the judiciary to political authority, thereby eroding one of the foundational pillars of democratic governance: the independence of the courts.

From this starting point, Barclay broadens his critique to encompass what he characterizes as a pattern of human rights violations and civil liberty restrictions. He alleges that the Lee administration has curtailed key freedoms, including religious expression, political assembly, and free speech. According to the [column](#), legislative initiatives introduced by the DPK are designed not merely to regulate public discourse but to actively suppress dissent and insulate government figures from criticism. Barclay interprets these actions as indicative of a governing philosophy that prioritizes political control over pluralism and open debate.

A particularly significant component of Barclay's argument concerns the legitimacy of the 2025 presidential election that brought Lee to power. He suggests that the election was compromised by irregularities, including alleged foreign interference linked to the People's Republic of China.

While these claims are presented as part of a broader narrative of democratic decay, Barclay emphasizes what he sees as the government's subsequent efforts to silence discussion of the election's integrity. He points to reported attempts to pressure international platforms to remove content questioning the results, framing this as an extension of domestic censorship into the global information sphere. Barclay writes,

"In fact, the Lee regime has recently attempted to coerce even international news and social media platforms, such as Twitter/X, to suspend any South Korean accounts that openly question the integrity of South Korea's 2025 election."



Kept long-term in tiny cell under inhuman conditions: Former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, here in a meeting at the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., April 27, 2023

To reinforce the gravity of the situation, Barclay references [remarks by Donald Trump](#), who publicly expressed concern about political conditions in South Korea, interpreting them as abnormal and troubling.

The [column](#) also devotes considerable attention to the treatment of political opponents. Barclay accuses the Lee administration of weaponizing legal mechanisms - particularly the office of Special Counsel - to target rival parties and conservative institutions. He describes raids on opposition headquarters and [religious organizations](#), portraying these actions as politically motivated rather than legally justified.

Central to this narrative is the case of former president Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열), whom Barclay claims was subjected to prolonged imprisonment under harsh conditions before ultimately receiving a severe sentence. In this context, Barclay interprets the legal proceedings against Yoon not as due process, but as a calculated effort to eliminate a political adversary. The Canadian political commentator describes it like this,

"In addition, the Lee regime falsely imprisoned South Korea's previous President, Yoon Suk Yeol, within a tiny cell and

'inhumane conditions' for over a year, before it finally granted Yoon a trial and sarcastically sentenced him 'to life imprisonment with hard labour'."

Religious figures also feature prominently in Barclay's critique. He highlights cases involving prominent

Christian leaders, arguing that their arrests and prosecution reflect ideological targeting rather than neutral law enforcement. These incidents are used to support a broader claim that the Lee administration is hostile to conservative and religious voices, particularly when they intersect with political opposition. William Barclay writes,

"Furthermore, the Lee regime has baselessly persecuted and arrested numerous Christian leaders, such as the brave Pastor Hyun-bo Son and the 82-year-old 'Mother of Peace', [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), because they are beacons of conservative ideology and dared to criticize the Lee regime."



Kept long-term in tiny cell under inhuman conditions: Pastor Son Hyun-bo, August 2025



Kept long-term in tiny cell under inhuman conditions: [Hak Ja Han](#), here on March 27, 2026 after more than 6 months in detention cell

Barclay further raises concern about proposed legal mechanisms - referred to as "dissolution orders" - that could enable the state to disband religious organizations deemed politically involved. He frames this as a profound encroachment on both religious freedom and civil society autonomy. As Barclay puts it,

"In truth, President Lee has effectively attempted to afford his government the ability to exile Christ himself from South Korea, via ghoulish new 'dissolution orders' that will permit the DPK to abort any 'religious foundations' adjudged to be even inadvertently implicated in the politics of the South Korean nation."

In addition to these allegations, Barclay underscores what he sees as systemic manipulation of democratic institutions. He argues that the judicial reforms allow President Lee to exert disproportionate influence over the Supreme Court, including the appointment of a substantial majority of its justices. This, in Barclay's assessment, effectively transforms the judiciary into an extension of executive power. He also criticizes the DPK's use of impeachment proceedings during Yoon's presidency, describing them as excessive and strategically deployed to paralyze governance and facilitate a transfer of power.

To bolster his argument, Barclay cites commentary from figures such as USA's former Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice, Morse Tan, who has warned of a deepening constitutional crisis in South Korea. These external voices are presented as validation that concerns about democratic backsliding are not confined to domestic critics but are shared by international observers.

The overall tone of [Barclay's piece](#) is urgent and cautionary. He portrays South Korea as a nation at a critical inflection point, where longstanding democratic norms are being systematically dismantled. While acknowledging the country's historical reputation as a democratic success story, he argues that recent developments threaten to reverse decades of political progress. His conclusion is stark: unless these trends are reversed, South Korea risks losing its democratic character altogether.

In essence, Barclay's column is less a neutral analysis than a polemical warning. It reframes a series of political, legal, and institutional developments into a coherent narrative of authoritarian transformation. Whether one accepts or challenges his interpretation, the piece is designed to provoke concern about the fragility of democratic systems and the potential for their erosion from within.

William Barclay is an award-winning Canadian political commentator and theorist associated with conservative thought. He contributes opinion pieces on politics, governance, and ideology, often emphasizing democratic principles, individual liberties, and critiques of left-leaning policies. He is recognized for his strong, polemical writing style.

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7,000 Protesting Proposed Anti-Religious Law

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South Korean demonstrators protesting expanded state powers over religion as 7,000 believers

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religion as 7,000 believers gather in front of national parliament



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

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

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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.

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.



Portrait of [Jo Bae-sook](#)
7th September 2023.
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Pastor Kim Un-seong (김운성) of Yeongnak Church (영락교회) speaking at the demonstration in Seoul 1st April 2026. Photo: [Segye Ilbo](#)

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.

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, here August 2025. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

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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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: From the demonstration in front of the national parliament in Seoul 1st April 2026. Photo: [Segye Ilbo](#)

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