

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Caged Mother Han's 2026 Nobel Nomination

Knut Holdhus
April 4, 2026



Mother Han speaking at a large peace rally in Seoul Olympic Stadium November 11, 2017

세계일보

Segye Ilbo

Hak Ja Han's Nobel nomination and international recognition spark reflection on South Korea's democratic maturity and social complexity

On 31st March 2026, the Korean newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#) published a [religious affairs column](#) reflecting on a recent and somewhat controversial development: the [nomination](#) for the Nobel Peace Prize of [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), leader of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea often referred to as [Unificationism](#) (통일교). Rather than focusing narrowly on whether she deserves the prize, the [article](#) uses this moment to explore a broader and more meaningful question - what this [nomination](#) reveals about the current state and maturity of South Korean society.



Segye Ilbo Religious Affairs Reporter Jeong Seong-su

The [article](#) begins with a simple but important observation: evaluating any prominent individual is rarely straightforward. This is especially true for figures whose lives intersect multiple domains such as religion, politics, and international activism. Such individuals tend to attract a wide range of opinions, often shaped by differing values, cultural contexts, and historical experiences. In this case, the [nomination](#) of [Hak Ja Han](#) - also called [Mother Han](#) - is not presented as a definitive endorsement of her legacy, but as a lens through which to examine how diverse perspectives coexist within a modern democratic society like South Korea.

A key point emphasized is that being [nominated](#) for the Nobel Peace Prize does not mean one will win it. Thousands of nominations are submitted annually, and Nobel Peace Prize nominations are not officially public. Publicizing a nomination is often regarded as a self-promotional or advocacy act by nominators or affiliated groups. That might be one reason why there has been little mention of the [nomination](#) of [Mother Han](#) in

South Korean mainstream media.

Still, religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수), the writer of the [Segye Ilbo column](#),

regards the [nomination](#) process itself as significant because it reflects, as he puts it, "evaluation grounded in values and standards shared by the international community." The person who [nominated Mother Han](#), Ján Figel', is highlighted as someone with considerable international credibility:

"Dr. Ján Figel' served as the chief negotiator for Slovakia's accession to the European Union and later became the country's first European Commissioner - an influential figure. Furthermore, he has worked as the European Union's Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief, addressing issues of religious freedom and human rights in the international community."



Jan Figel, European Union's Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief 2016-2019, here in July 2023

The [article](#) suggests that his background in European politics and his role in promoting religious freedom lend weight to his decision. His [nomination](#) should not, however, be seen simply as personal support, but as an assessment grounded in internationally recognized values such as peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, and human rights.

According to the [column](#), Figel's [nomination](#) letter praises [Mother Han](#)'s lifelong efforts in promoting global peace, encouraging dialogue between religions, and advocating for strong [family values](#) as a foundation for social cohesion. The [nomination](#) letter also notes her involvement in initiatives related to peace on the Korean Peninsula, as well as her [organization](#)'s engagement in cultural and diplomatic activities aimed at fostering international understanding. One specific example mentioned is the [Women's Federation for World Peace](#), an organization she founded, which holds consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This detail is used to illustrate how a [movement](#) that originated in Korea has gradually gained recognition within established international institutions.

However, the [article](#) does not ignore the fact that [Mother Han](#) and her [organization](#) remain controversial within South Korea. There are ongoing [legal issues](#) and continued public debate surrounding the [group](#)'s activities and influence. These domestic criticisms are presented not as contradictions to the [nomination](#), but as part of a larger democratic process. The author argues that disagreements and scrutiny are natural in a society where multiple value systems coexist. In fact, the presence of such debates is framed as evidence of South Korea's institutional strength and resilience. Over time, Korean society has developed mechanisms - legal, political, and social - for addressing complex and sensitive issues involving religion and public life.



Aggressively taking the country in an authoritarian direction: Lee Jae-myung, President of South Korea since 4th June 2025

The [column](#) encourages readers to view the [nomination](#) not as a final judgment, but as a meeting point of different evaluative standards. On one side are international perspectives that may prioritize certain contributions to peace and global cooperation. On the other side are domestic viewpoints shaped by local history, media coverage, and personal experiences. Rather than forcing a single conclusion, the article suggests that acknowledging this diversity of perspectives is itself a sign of a mature society.

This idea is further expanded by placing the discussion in the broader context of South Korea's rapid development. Within a relatively short period, the country has transformed from a war-torn nation into a major economic power with a well-established democratic system. Throughout this transformation, religion has played varied and sometimes conflicting roles. It has contributed to social unity in some instances, while in others it has been a source of controversy or division.

The important point, according to the [article](#), is that these experiences have collectively strengthened society's ability to handle complexity. Instead of suppressing differences, there has at least until recently been a growing tendency to address them through open discussion and formal procedures. Hopefully, such a situation is allowed to continue in spite of the current Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration seemingly taking the country in an [authoritarian direction](#).

Finally, the [article](#) reflects on how South Korea today operates at the intersection of domestic and global

standards. As the country becomes more integrated into the international community, it increasingly encounters situations where external evaluations differ from internal perceptions. These differences, however, are not necessarily harmful. The author argues that they can serve as opportunities for mutual reflection. International viewpoints can prompt Koreans to reexamine their own assumptions, while domestic experiences can provide deeper context for outsiders trying to understand Korean society.

The [nomination](#) of [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) is presented not as a simple story about one individual's achievements or controversies, but as a moment that highlights the complexity and maturity of South Korea as a society. It raises important questions about how different values are balanced, how public debates are conducted, and how a nation positions itself within a global framework.

Regardless of whether the [nomination](#) leads to an award, the [article](#) suggests that the real significance lies in how people, media, and institutions respond to what some may perceive as a controversial nomination. By "engaging thoughtfully with differing perspectives", the writer is pointing to norms like open debate, tolerance of disagreement, and critical scrutiny. A controversial [nomination](#) is a stress test for democratic maturity. If society responds with reasoned debate rather than reflexive polarization, that's more valuable than the award outcome itself. The [nomination](#) becomes a case study in democratic culture rather than just a question of merit.

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South Korea's Slide Toward Authoritarianism

April 3, 2026 • Knut Holdhus

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Lee Jae-myung and fellow politicians from the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK). Photo (10th July 2024): Lee Jae-myung / Wikimedia Commons License: CC Attr 3.0 Ulp

Canadian political commentator William Barclay issues warning on rapid and alarming slide toward becoming a state

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Experts Question

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).

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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.



South Korea’s slide toward authoritarianism through judicial reforms. Illustration ChatGPT, 3rd April 2026.

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

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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."

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.



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., 27th April 2023. DoD photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Alexander Kubitza / US Secretary of Defense. License: CC Attr 2.0 Gen. Cropped*

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'."





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



Kept long-term in tiny cell under inhuman conditions: [Pastor Son Hyun-bo](#), here August 2025. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

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.”

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

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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