FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's New, Vague. Faith Control Law - Fear Mounts

Knut Holdhus
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Scholar issues warning about vague new law that allows state to arbitrarily dissolve religious organizations. Illustration: Chat GPT

세계일보

Segye Ilbo


Proposed controversial radical bill: Leftwing national assembly member Choi Hyuk-jin from Democratic Party of Korea (DPK). Illustration by Grok xAI

Politics of religion expert issues stark warning about vaguely worded "Religious Organization Dissolution Act" that would allow state to dismantle an organization and seize its assets because of comments on social or moral issues

On 28th April 2026, Professor Na Jeong-won (나정원), an emeritus scholar of politics of religion at Kangwon National University, published an opinion column in the daily newspaper Segye Ilbo addressing a controversial legislative proposal in South Korea. It was made by Representative Choi Hyuk-jin (최혁진) who joined the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) in 2020 but has a long record of involvement in various leftwing parties including the Socialist Party of Korea, known for its anti-capitalism. The proposed bill is formally titled a "Partial Amendment to the Civil Act" but widely referred to as the "Religious Organization Dissolution Act", has sparked debate about constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom and overreach of state power.

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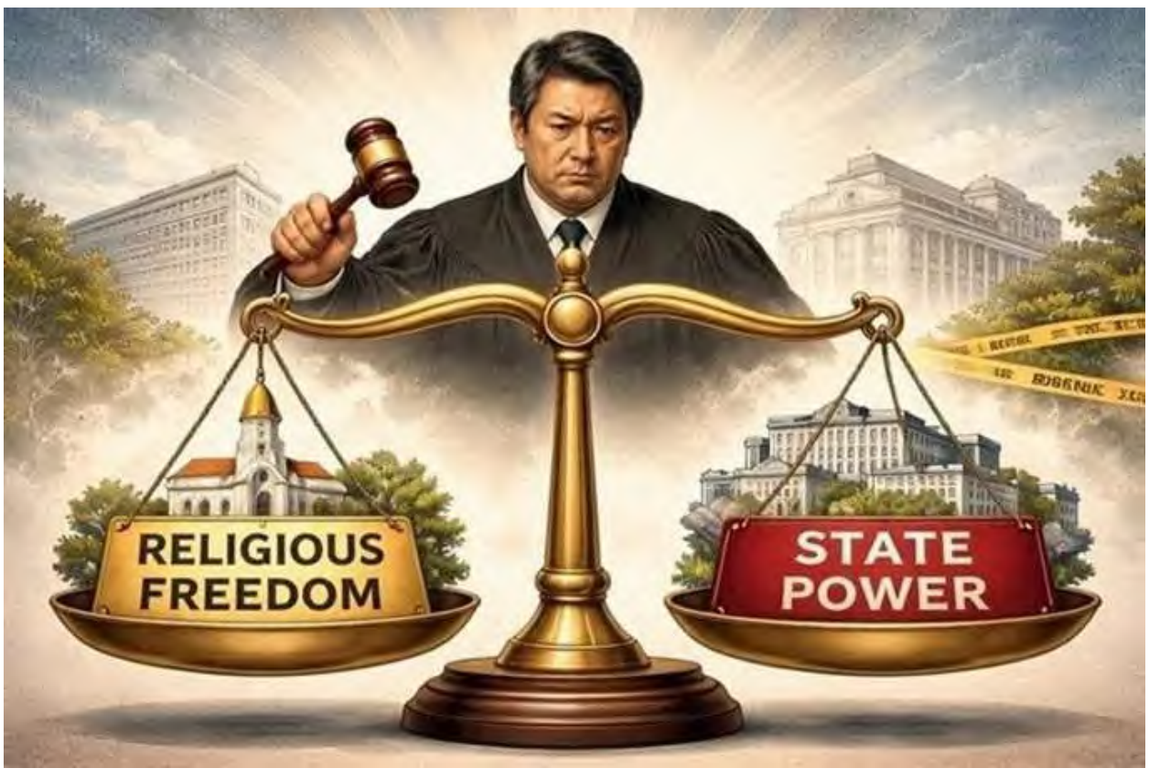
Professor Na argues that, despite its stated goal of improving transparency among nonprofit organizations, the bill poses a serious threat to core constitutional principles - particularly freedom of religion and the separation of religion and state.

Professor Na Jeong-won, an emeritus scholar of politics of religion at Kangwon National University. Image: Grok xAI

At the heart of the issue is a fundamental question: should a government have the power to dissolve a religious organization? While governments commonly regulate nonprofit entities, including religious groups, Professor Na contends that this proposal goes far beyond administrative oversight. Instead, he sees it as opening the door for direct state intervention in religious life, something that modern constitutional democracies generally seek to avoid.

One of the first concerns raised in the column is the way the bill is presented. Rather than being introduced explicitly as a law targeting religious organizations, its provisions are embedded within broader amendments to civil law governing nonprofits. **This, according to Professor Na, obscures its true intent and undermines transparency in the legislative process.** He suggests that such framing makes it harder for both lawmakers and the public to fully grasp the implications of the proposal. Existing laws already allow for the dissolution of nonprofit organizations under certain conditions, so singling out religious groups under a new and less clearly defined standard raises questions about fairness and legislative honesty.

A central criticism of the bill lies in its vague criteria for dissolving religious organizations. The proposal allows authorities to take such action if a group is found to have "significantly harmed the public interest". While this may sound reasonable in principle, Professor Na emphasizes that the lack of a precise definition makes it highly problematic. In legal systems based on the rule of law, citizens and organizations must be able to predict what conduct is prohibited and what consequences may follow. **Without clear standards, enforcement can become arbitrary, potentially influenced by political considerations rather than objective criteria.**



The current Lee Jae-myung administration is trying to introduce a vague new law that would give the state powers to arbitrarily dissolve religious organizations, effectively violating the country's constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom. Illustration: ChatGPT

The bill also introduces "violation of the separation of religion and state" as a reason for dissolution. Professor Na argues that this reflects a misunderstanding - or even a reversal - of the concept. In many democratic systems, including South Korea's, the principle of separation is designed primarily to protect religion from government interference. It ensures that the state cannot control religious institutions or favor one faith over another. However, under the proposed

law, this principle could be used in the opposite direction: as a justification for the state to penalize religious organizations that express political views or engage in public debate.

This raises further concerns about freedom of expression. Religious leaders and communities often speak about social and moral issues, which can overlap with politics. According to Professor Na, the bill could allow authorities to interpret such activities as improper political involvement, thereby exposing religious organizations to sanctions. Even ordinary acts - such as a sermon addressing contemporary social problems or a religious individual participating in civic life - might be seen as violations, depending on how the law is applied. This, he argues, risks chilling both religious expression and broader democratic participation.

Another major issue highlighted in the article is the scope of investigative powers granted to government authorities. The bill would allow officials to demand documents, summon individuals for questioning, and enter organizational premises without a judicial warrant. Although the proposal includes language suggesting that these actions are not part of criminal investigations, Professor Na questions this distinction. In practice, the ability to dismantle an organization and seize its assets resembles the consequences of criminal enforcement. Without judicial oversight, such powers could leave religious groups vulnerable to administrative overreach.

To underscore the potential dangers, Professor Na draws on historical examples. He notes that governments have often justified the suppression of religious groups in the name of maintaining public order or national stability. **From ancient imperial decrees to modern authoritarian laws, such measures have frequently been used to silence dissenting voices. In the South Korean context, he points out that no law since the country's founding has explicitly authorized the dissolution of religious organizations by the state. Passing such legislation, he warns, could damage the country's international reputation as a society that respects religious freedom.**

In terms of possible responses, Professor Na outlines two main paths. The most straightforward would be for the law's sponsor to withdraw it voluntarily, possibly replacing it with a revised proposal that addresses legitimate concerns without infringing on constitutional rights.

The alternative would involve public resistance at each stage of the legislative process, from committee deliberations to final approval. While he acknowledges that the right to resist is an extreme measure, he frames it as a last resort when fundamental freedoms are at stake.

At its simplest, the "right to resist" means that when state power becomes unjust or unlawful - especially when it infringes on basic freedoms - people are not morally or constitutionally obliged to comply, and may actively resist. The concept has deep roots in political philosophy. Thinkers like John Locke argued that if a government breaches the social contract - by attacking life, liberty, or property - citizens regain the right to resist or even replace it.

At the same time, the column does not place all responsibility on the government. Professor Na calls for introspection within religious communities themselves. He suggests that religious institutions must consider whether they have maintained public trust and upheld their social responsibilities. If religious groups are perceived as overly aligned with political power or as failing to act ethically, they may weaken their own ability to resist unjust policies. In this sense, safeguarding religious freedom is not only a legal issue but also a moral and social one.

Finally, Professor Na proposes a constructive way forward. Rather than pursuing legislation that risks overreach, he encourages collaboration among government agencies, religious organizations, and academic experts to develop a more balanced legal framework. Drawing on examples from the European Union and the United States, such a framework could clarify the boundaries between religion and state while preserving mutual independence. The goal, he suggests, should be a system in which both spheres coexist in a complementary relationship, guided by clearly defined constitutional principles.

Professor Na's basic argument is that the proposed law, though presented as a technical reform, carries far-reaching implications. **By granting broad and ambiguous powers to the state, the law is likely to undermine the very freedoms it claims to regulate.** For an international audience, the debate reflects a broader and familiar question: the separation of religion and state. In Professor Na's view, the two must work together to "develop a Korean-style legal framework" with a firm commitment to the constitutional values that underpin a democratic society.

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U.S. Religious Leaders Criticize the Japanese Government

ICRF Holds Symposium on Dissolution of Family Federation

by editorial staff of Sekai Nippo

Venerable Wakō Higashi. Photo: Sekai Nippo

An organization of experts working to promote freedom of religion, the *International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF)*, held a symposium chaired by Wakō Higashi (東和空) in Tokyo on 27th April on the theme of the dissolution of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the Unification Church). Following the *Tokyo High Court*'s dismissal on 4th March of an immediate appeal against the dissolution order, criticism was raised over the situation in which church facilities across the country were seized on the same day.

Archbishop George Stallings of the United States strongly condemned the Japanese government, saying it was "madness to think that the government knows better than believers what a church should be." Expressing his concern, he added,

> "At the core of religious freedom is the right to choose for oneself whom to worship. The idea that the government, rather than individuals, decides how much one should donate or contribute turns the government into a 'monster'."

He further appealed to religious leaders at the venue:

> "If the government can dissolve the Family Federation, then you are next. We must pray together, stand together, and not overlook the actions of the government."

Pastor Hiroshi Kurose (黒瀬博) of the *Tokyo West Baptist Church* emphasized,

> "Closing church buildings and confiscating property are exactly what communist states have done – it is a national crime."

Pastor Hiroshi Kurose (黒瀬博) of the Tokyo West

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Addressing members of the Family Federation, he urged,

Baptist Church. Photo: Sekai Nippo

> "You should record your experiences for the future. Someday, people in the future will surely deliver a proper judgment."

Participants from the Buddhist community also stated that "Japan's religious world is in a dire state." They expressed their views, including describing the Tokyo High Court's decision as "judicial suicide".

In addition, members of the Family Federation gave reports on the actual situation surrounding the dissolution. Kimihiro Okamitsu (岡光君啓), who is in charge of a church facility in Shinjuku, Tokyo, pointed out that not only access to church facilities but also believers' marriages and funerals have been affected. He stated,

> "It is a fundamental human right to wish to conduct life's most important rites at the center of one's faith."

Featured image *above:* Archbishop George Augustus Stallings speaking at a symposium of the *International Coalition for Religious Freedom* (ICRF), 27th April 2026 in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, Japan. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

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