

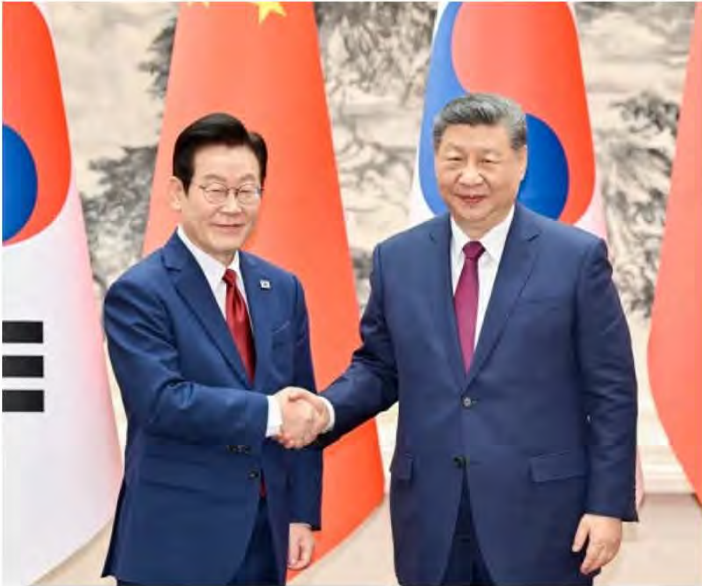
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South Korea: A Law to Dissolve Churches at Will

by Massimo Introvigne | Feb 23, 2026 | News Global

The bill now being considered by the Parliament would be the most draconian in the democratic world and mark the quiet death of religious liberty in the country.

by Massimo Introvigne



South Korean President Lee Jae Myung with Xi Jinping. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China.

South Korea's Parliament is currently considering a [legal amendment](#) that is so extensive and dismissive of constitutional protections that one might question whether its authors expect the public to read beyond the introduction. The proposal states, in its official explanation, that current law permits authorities to revoke a nonprofit corporation's establishment permit only when it "conducts activities outside its stated purpose, violates the conditions of its establishment permit, or engages in acts harmful to the public interest." It then expresses concern that "cases have occurred in which organizations commit anti-social acts, principle of separation of religion and state," yet there are not enough legal means to sanction them effectively. The drafters also argue that even when authorities identify wrongdoing, "the lack of clear investigative authority makes effective supervision structurally difficult." Their proposed solution is to "clarify the grounds for revoking establishment permits, codify investigative powers, and strengthen the system that requires the remaining assets of anti-social corporations to go to the national treasury, thus preventing abuse of corporate status and protecting constitutional order."

This is a striking example of legislative language: a declaration of good intentions hiding a plan for unprecedented government intrusion into religious life. When expressed in simpler terms, the amendment becomes a tool for dissolving churches at will, conducting searches without warrants, and seizing their property.

The amendment to Article 37 is the first warning sign. It gives authorities the power to require religious organizations to provide financial and operational records with little notice. This creates a constant compliance burden. Any church that hesitates, questions the request, or cannot produce documents quickly enough risks being seen as uncooperative or suspicious.

The revised Article 38 goes even further, allowing the government to revoke a religious organization's establishment permit, *inter alia*, if it is seen as having "violated the separation of religion and state" or "harmed the public interest." These terms are so broad that they could apply to nearly any type of political expression. A pastor who criticizes a government policy, a Buddhist group that opposes a development project, or a Catholic bishop who speaks out on human rights could all be accused of political involvement or harming the public interest. The amendment allows for dissolution if any "representative, director, or agent" is sentenced to prison for actions "related to the organization" and done repeatedly. The actions of one person could lead the state to dissolve an entire religious group.

The amendment appears to have been drafted with the case of Mother Han in

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mind, the leader of the Unification Church, who is currently in jail awaiting trial. If she is sentenced, this will be an automatic ground for the dissolution of her church, without further investigation. But even the sentencing of a lesser “director or agent” would be enough to trigger dissolution.



Mother Han, the “Mother of Peace.” Source: Universal Peace Federation.

Then we see the newly created Article 38-2, which allows officials to enter church premises and inspect financial records, documents, and property status based only on suspicion, without a warrant. The amendment’s own justification notes that the investigative authority is currently unclear. Its solution is to remove ambiguity by eliminating judicial oversight. A government that disapproves of a church’s sermons, advocacy, or political views can now enter without warning, search through its documents, and carry out intrusive inspections under the guise of administrative oversight.

Finally, the amendment to Article 80 seals the framework of control. If a religious organization’s permit is revoked, its remaining assets “may not be transferred to other religious entities” and instead go to the National Treasury. In other words, they are confiscated. A dissolved church cannot pass on its property to another denomination, a mission organization, or a charity. The state takes everything from

its buildings to its bank accounts and sacred objects. The amendment claims this will prevent “abuse of corporate status.” In truth, it guarantees that once the government dissolves a religious body, nothing of it remains.

Together, these provisions create a legal environment where the government can silence religious critics, dismantle disfavored groups, and seize their assets with little procedural resistance. The amendment’s repeated mentions of “safeguarding constitutional order” border on the absurd. The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, not freedom of religion conditioned on government approval of one’s sermons. The separation of religion and state is intended to prevent government interference in religious matters, not to empower the government to dissolve religious bodies for political purposes.

If passed, this amendment would position South Korea among the world’s most intrusive regulatory systems for religious organizations, aligning it with the Chinese model. It would equip any future administration—regardless of its political stance—with the tools to intimidate, silence, or dismantle religious communities that fall out of favor. If Parliament genuinely wants to uphold constitutional order, it should start by rejecting laws that violate it.

APPENDIX

Full text of the proposal and draft bill

**Partial Amendment Bill to the Civil Act
(Proposed by Representative Choi Hyuk-jin)**

Bill No.	15932
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Date of Proposal: January 9, 2026
 Proposers: Choi Hyuk-jin, Kim Woo-young, Kim Jun-hyuk,
 Kim Jae-won, Kwon Chil-seung, Yeom Tae-young,
 Lee Geon-tae, Lee Sung-yoon, Song Jae-bong,
 Seo Mi-hwa and Son Sol
 (11 members)

Purpose of the Proposal and Main Contents

Under the current law, when a non-profit corporation conducts business beyond its stated purpose, violates the conditions of its establishment permit, or engages in other acts that harm the public interest, the competent authority may revoke

its establishment permit.

However, the requirement of “other acts that harm the public interest” is overly broad and abstract, resulting in low legal predictability and leading to passive responses by the competent authority. In particular, there have recently been cases in which some non-profit corporations have abused their corporate status to commit serious crimes in an organized and repeated manner, or engage in antisocial conduct, such as colluding with specific political forces in violation of the constitutional principle of separation of religion and state. Nevertheless, the legal means to effectively sanction such conduct remain insufficient.

Furthermore, even when the competent authority becomes aware of unlawful acts, the authority responsible for investigating them is not clearly defined, creating a structural limitation that makes effective supervision difficult.

Accordingly, this bill seeks to specify the grounds for revoking the establishment permit of a corporation, clearly stipulate the investigative authority of the competent administrative agency, and strengthen the system under which the residual assets of antisocial corporations revert to the national treasury, thereby preventing the abuse of corporate personality and safeguarding the constitutional order (proposed Article 37, etc.).

Act No. (blank)

Partial Amendment Bill to the Civil Act

Part of the Civil Act shall be amended as follows.

The portion of Article 37 other than the title shall be designated as Paragraph (1), and Paragraphs (2) through (4) shall be newly added to the same Article as follows:

(2) Where necessary for inspection and supervision under Paragraph (1), the competent authority may take the following measures with respect to a corporation:

Order the submission of relevant documents, ledgers, or other reference materials;

Have affiliated public officials inspect the corporation's affairs and financial status;

Require the attendance and statements of the corporation's representative or its officers and employees.

(3) A public official who inspects a corporation's affairs pursuant to Paragraph (2) shall carry identification indicating such authority and present it to the relevant persons.

(4) Before taking measures under Paragraph (2), the competent authority shall provide the corporation with an opportunity to submit its opinion. However, this shall not apply where urgency is required or where it is deemed that granting an opportunity to submit opinions would make it impossible to achieve the purpose of supervision.

Article 38 shall be amended as follows:

Article 38 (Revocation of Establishment Permit of a Corporation) (1) The competent authority may revoke the establishment permit of a corporation where the corporation falls under any one of the following subparagraphs.

When it conducts business beyond its stated purpose;

When it violates the conditions of its establishment permit;

When, without justifiable grounds, it fails to commence its purpose business within one year from the date of receiving the establishment permit, or has no business performance for one year or longer;

When the corporation's representative, director, or agent is finally convicted of a crime related to the corporation's affairs punishable by imprisonment without labor or heavier punishment under other statutes, and such conduct is repeatedly carried out at the organizational level of the corporation or is condoned by the corporation;

When the corporation violates the principle of separation of religion and state under Article 20(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea or related laws such as the Public Official Election Act, and systematically and repeatedly intervenes in political activities related to elections, political parties, or candidates in an organized manner, thereby significantly harming the public interest;

When, through a serious act equivalent to the grounds in subparagraphs 1 through 5, the corporation otherwise violates laws or significantly harms the public interest.

(2) Where the competent authority intends to revoke the establishment permit pursuant to Paragraph (1), it shall conduct a hearing.

(3) Even where grounds under the subparagraphs of Paragraph (1) exist, if the degree of violation is minor or correction is possible, the competent authority may set a period and order corrective measures. In such cases, if the corporation fails to make corrections within that period, the establishment permit may be revoked.

Article 38-2 shall be newly established as follows.

Article 38-2 (Investigation of Business and Financial Status)

(1) Where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a corporation falls under any of the subparagraphs of Article 38(1), the competent authority may order the corporation to submit reports on its business and financial status or require the submission of necessary materials.

(2) Where necessary for verification under Paragraph (1), the competent authority may have affiliated public officials enter the corporation's office, place of business, or other locations to inspect ledgers, documents, and other items, or to question relevant persons.

(3) A public official who conducts entry, inspection, or questioning pursuant to Paragraph (2) shall carry identification indicating such authority and present it to the relevant persons.

(4) Entry, inspection, or questioning under Paragraph (2) shall not be construed as being for criminal investigation.

Paragraphs (4) and (5) shall be newly added to Article 80 as follows:

(4) Where a corporation's establishment permit is revoked on the grounds specified in Article 38(1)4 or 5, its residual assets shall, notwithstanding Paragraphs (1) and (2), revert to the national treasury.

(5) Assets that have reverted to the national treasury pursuant to Paragraph (4) shall be managed by the competent authority and may be used for similar public interest purposes.

Addendum

Article 1 (Effective Date) This Act shall enter into force on the date six months after its promulgation.

Article 2 (Application) The amended provisions of Article 80(4) shall apply from cases in which, after the enforcement of this Act, a corporation's establishment permit is revoked on the grounds specified in Article 38(1)4 or 5.

Article 3 (Transitional Measures) The amended provisions of Article 38-2 shall apply to investigation or supervisory procedures concerning corporations that are in progress at the time this Act enters into force.

Comparison Table of New and Existing Provisions

Current	Proposed Amendment
Article 37 (Inspection and Supervision of a Corporation's Affairs) (omitted) <Newly inserted> <Newly inserted> <Newly inserted>	Article 37 (Inspection and Supervision of a Corporation's Affairs) (1) (Same as the current provision except for the title) (2) Where necessary for inspection and supervision under Paragraph (1), the competent authority may take the following measures with respect to a corporation: Order the submission of relevant documents, ledgers, or other reference materials; Have affiliated public officials inspect the corporation's affairs and financial status; Require the attendance and statements of the corporation's representative or its officers and employees. (3) A public official who inspects a corporation's affairs pursuant to Paragraph (2) shall carry identification indicating such authority and present it to the relevant persons. (4) Before taking measures under Paragraph (2), the competent authority shall provide the corporation with an opportunity to submit its opinion. However, this shall not apply where urgency is required or where it is deemed that granting an opportunity to submit opinions would make it impossible to achieve the purpose of supervision.
Article 38 (Revocation of Establishment Permit of a Corporation) Where a corporation conducts business	Article 38 (Revocation of Establishment Permit of a Corporation)

beyond its purpose, violates the conditions of its establishment permit, or commits other acts harmful to the public interest, the competent authority may revoke such permit.	(1) The competent authority may revoke the establishment permit of a corporation where the corporation falls under any one of the following subparagraphs: When it conducts
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	<p>subparagraphs, when it conducts business beyond its purpose; When it violates the conditions of its establishment permit; When, without justifiable grounds, it fails to commence its purpose business within one year from the date of receiving the establishment permit, or has no business performance for one year or longer; When the corporation's representative, director, or agent is finally convicted of a crime related to the corporation's affairs punishable by imprisonment without labor or a heavier penalty under other statutes, and such conduct is repeatedly carried out at the organizational level of the corporation or is condoned by the corporation; Where the corporation violates the principle of separation of religion and state as prescribed in Article 20(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, or related statutes such as the Public Official Election Act, and, in relation to elections, political parties, or candidates, systematically and repeatedly</p>
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<p><Newly inserted></p>	<p>intervenes in political activities in an organized and structured manner, thereby significantly harming the public interest; When, through a serious act equivalent to the grounds outlined in subparagraphs 1 through 5, the corporation otherwise violates laws or significantly harms the public interest. (2) Where the competent authority intends to revoke the establishment permit pursuant to Paragraph (1), it shall conduct a hearing. (3) Even where grounds under the subparagraphs of Paragraph (1) exist, if the degree of the violation is minor or correction is possible, the competent authority may set a period and order corrective measures. In such cases, if the corporation fails to make corrections within that period, the establishment permit may be revoked. Article 38-2 (Investigation of Business and Financial Status) (1) Where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a corporation falls under any of the subparagraphs of Article 38(1), the competent authority may order the corporation to submit reports on its business operations and financial status or require the submission of necessary materials. (2) Where necessary for verification</p>
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Article 80 (Attribution of Residual Assets) (1) to (3) (omitted)
<Newly inserted>

<Newly inserted>

construed as being for criminal investigation.

Article 80 (Attribution of Residual Assets) (1) to (3) (Same as the current provision)

(4) Where a corporation's establishment permit is revoked on the grounds specified in Article 38(1)4 or 5, its residual assets shall, notwithstanding Paragraphs (1) and (2), revert to the national treasury.
(5) Assets that have reverted to the national treasury pursuant to Paragraph (4) shall be managed by the competent authority and may be used for similar public interest purposes.

Religious Liberty, South Korea, Unification Church



Massimo Introvigne

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions ([CESNUR](#)), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the

author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#) and of the executive board of University of California Press' [Nova Religio](#). From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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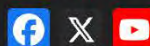
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