

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Religious Liberty Under Fire in South Korea

Knut Holdhus
August 6, 2025



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, here speaking at a conference on religious freedom in Geneva, Switzerland on June 16, 2025

South Korea's Religious Liberty Crisis

Authoritarian Shadows Over Seoul as Sacred Spaces Are Raided and Rights Violated

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The Washington Times

In his compelling Washington Times op-ed 5th August titled "[A new religious liberty crisis in Korea](#)", renowned sociologist of religion Dr. Massimo Introvigne presents a sobering warning: South Korea, a country often praised for its democracy and human rights record, is now witnessing a disturbing escalation in state interference in religious affairs - especially targeting conservative religious movements.

His article frames this not merely as a domestic legal issue but as part of a broader and more ominous international trend where governments, emboldened by media support and political motivations, undermine religious freedom under the guise of rooting out "cults".

At the heart of Introvigne's argument is the case of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), formerly known as the [Unification Church](#). A criminal investigation involving a former executive accused of bribery and misusing funds has triggered sweeping state action.

Although the [organization](#) insists it was not institutionally involved in these alleged personal misdeeds, prosecutors have carried out aggressive raids on the [Federation](#)'s main sacred grounds and even the home of its leader, Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#). These actions, particularly the travel ban placed on [Dr. Han](#) - known globally as the "Mother of Peace" - are portrayed by Introvigne as excessive and politically charged.

What makes the situation alarming, according to Dr. Introvigne, is that this is not an isolated case. Other prominent conservative churches, such as the Yoido Full Gospel Church, have also faced raids.

These events, he argues, reveal a pattern: the targeting of religious bodies aligned with conservative, pro-American, or traditional [family values](#). This signals a broader agenda - one that could eventually endanger the religious liberty of all groups deemed ideologically inconvenient by the current political elite.



Dr. Hak Ja Han addressing an audience of 70,000 at Seoul World cup Stadium November 11, 2017

Introvigne connects this crackdown in South Korea to global ideological shifts. He suggests that Korean authorities may be emulating controversial legal measures from France and Japan - countries that have introduced "anti-cult" laws widely criticized by international legal scholars for violating fundamental freedoms.

Even more concerning is the claim that Korean anti-religious policies have been influenced by China, whose government is known for its aggressive suppression of religious and spiritual movements perceived as threatening to the Communist Party's ideology.



Former President of South Korea Yoon-Suk-yeol Sep. 19, 2023

The Italian scholar writes,

"The immediate cause of what is happening in Korea is the new administration's intent to punish former President Yoon and whomever offered him support. The remote cause, however, is the growing influence in the country of a movement targeting "cults" that dates back to the 1950s, when groups such as the [Unification Church](#) were established and quickly became influential. Scholars have noted that these campaigns have been fueled by China, which is hostile to conservative and anti-Communist religious movements, including the [Unification Church](#). Evidence has emerged of a sustained and decade-long cooperation between Korean anti-cultists and their Chinese counterparts, who operate under the supervision of the Communist Party."

If true, this raises the prospect that authoritarian models are beginning to influence policies in democratic states under the guise of public safety or reform.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the current crisis, as highlighted in the article, is the continued practice of [forced deprogramming](#). Introvigne recalls the harrowing stories of individuals [kidnapped](#) by family members or anti-cult groups, held in [confinement](#), and subjected to psychological pressure until they [recant their beliefs](#).

This practice, which had been widespread in Japan until its courts began ruling against it in 2015, persists in South Korea with tacit judicial tolerance. The international human rights community has documented thousands of such cases, some ending in psychological trauma or even death. That South Korea - an advanced democracy - remains a stronghold of such a practice is a severe indictment of its human rights

regime.

Beyond the legal and ideological dimensions, Introvigne also emphasizes the symbolic harm inflicted by the state's actions. The raids on churches were not only legally questionable, he argues, but also culturally and spiritually disrespectful. Sacred sites were treated as crime scenes; respected religious leaders were subjected to humiliating scrutiny.

Such actions appear designed not only to investigate potential wrongdoing but to delegitimize and stigmatize entire faith communities. The public nature of these raids, often conducted with media present, suggests they may be intended as much for spectacle as for justice.



MIVILUDES, a French government agency to fight so-called "cults"

In presenting this analysis, Introvigne underscores a pattern seen in many other democracies: unpopular or minority groups are first targeted under vague or stigmatizing labels - like "[cult](#)" - which allows governments to enact sweeping measures with minimal public resistance.

Introvigne points out,

"Rumors that other conservative churches and religious movements may soon be targeted continue to circulate. Activists who seem to have the ear of the new Korean administration propose to introduce new statutes based on laws existing in France and Japan (and widely criticized by international religious liberty activists and legal scholars), allowing for the swift dissolution of movements labeled as 'cults'."



Fighting for religious liberty: Second-generation members of the [Family Federation](#) protesting 6th May 2025 outside the Japanese parliament against the dehumanizing treatment inflicted on them by the authorities in league with militant lawyers

Once this legal and political machinery is in place, however, it rarely stops with the original targets. Larger and more mainstream religious groups eventually come under scrutiny, especially when their values clash with those in power. The slippery slope is clear: today's "[cult](#)" can quickly become tomorrow's church.

Introvigne's article ultimately serves as a crucial call to vigilance for defenders of religious liberty. It urges international observers, legal scholars, and human rights advocates not to overlook what may appear to be domestic controversies but are in fact part of a global struggle over freedom of belief and conscience. South Korea, long seen as a democratic model in Asia, risks damaging its reputation if it continues down this path.

What is needed now, as the article concludes implicitly, is firm resistance from civil society, religious leaders, and international institutions. Korea's democratic institutions must uphold the fundamental principles of religious freedom, even - or especially - when doing so is politically inconvenient.

The suppression of any faith, regardless of its popularity or ideology, is a dangerous breach of democratic norms. Left unchallenged, it could herald an era in which governments, not individuals, decide which beliefs are acceptable.

See also [Raids Blur Line Between Justice and Politics](#)

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A new religious liberty crisis in Korea



Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon delivered the keynote address at the Global Rally for the Reunification of Korea at Seoul's World Cup Stadium. (PHOTO CREDIT: HSA-UWC)
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COMMENTARY
By Massimo Introvigne - Tuesday, August 5, 2025

OPINION:

Many have heard through media reports, which are not always correct, of a criminal investigation pending in South Korea involving a former executive of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly known as the Unification Church and still often referred to by that name).

He is accused of financial irregularities and donating luxury goods, including jewelry and designer handbags, to the former First Lady of Korea to secure her husband's patronage, the now disgraced former President of South Korea, Yoon Suk-yeol.

While the [Family Federation](#) denies it was involved as an organization in what might have been personal initiatives of a rogue executive, a Special Prosecutor appointed to investigate has hit with military-style raids both the church's main premises—and most sacred grounds—in Korea and the house of its leader, Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#). She has been named a suspect in the case and placed under a travel ban.

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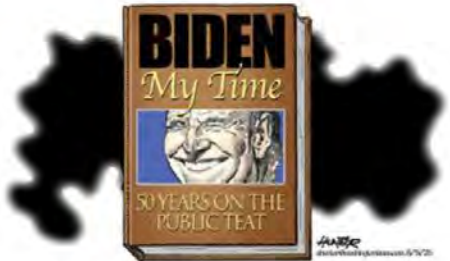
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STORY TOPICS

What we are witnessing in Korea is a politically motivated crackdown on conservative religion raiding churches, such as the July 18th raid on the very famous Yoido Full Gospel Church one of the world's largest and most famous Pentecostal congregations as well as earlier raids in May on the Saegero Church and in June the Woonjeong Chamjon Church – all conservative organizations. Some Korean politicians have been influenced by both [Japan](#) and China, which, in different ways, actively promote the belief that religions advocating for conservative values - including the [Family Federation](#), but not limited to it - are toxic and dangerous.

We see a second religious liberty crisis in Asia unfolding, paralleling [Japan's](#).

Rumors that other conservative churches and religious movements may soon be targeted continue to circulate. Activists who seem to have the ear of the new Korean administration propose to introduce new statutes based on laws existing in France and [Japan](#) (and widely criticized by international religious liberty activists and legal scholars), allowing for the swift dissolution of movements labeled as “cults.”

The immediate cause of what is happening in Korea is the new administration's intent to punish former President Yoon and whomever offered him support. The remote cause, however, is the growing influence in the country of a movement targeting “cults” that dates back to the 1950s, when groups such as the Unification Church were established and quickly became influential. Scholars have noted that these campaigns have been fueled by China, which is hostile to conservative and anti-Communist religious movements, including the Unification Church. Evidence has emerged of a sustained and decade-long cooperation between Korean anti-cultists and their Chinese counterparts, who operate under the supervision of the Communist Party.

As the case of the Yoido Church demonstrates, this movement now targets all brands of religion perceived as conservative, pro-American, and defending traditional family values.

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As happened in [Japan](#) before the Supreme Court outlawed the practice in 2015, young adult members of some religious movements become victims of “forced conversion” or deprogramming. They are kidnapped by or on behalf of their parents, confined in apartments or motels, and bombarded with slanderous information against their religions. They are allowed to leave only if they agree to “deconvert” and write letters renouncing their membership in the religious organizations their parents disapprove of.

A coalition opposing deprogramming has documented more than 6000 cases between [Japan](#) and Korea. Some ended tragically. Yet

6000 cases between Japan and Korea. Some ended tragically. yet, Korea remains the only democratic country in the world where most courts still tolerate deprogramming. Japan's courts for decades have turned a blind eye to faith breaking until Mr. Toru Goto, who was held confined and held captive for over 12 years, won his supreme court case, which sentenced the faith breakers to pay substantial damages and in essence outlawed deprogramming in 2015. Still, the problem may resurface in Japan and continue in Korea.

This raises serious religious liberty concerns. Both the Yoido Church and the Family Federation have complained that the raids have been unnecessarily harsh and spectacular, as if they were primarily conducted for the benefit of the media, showing little respect for their sacred places and internationally well-known religious leaders. They are both asking for apologies from the prosecutors for their total disregard for the sanctity of church sanctuaries. Dr. Han leads a global spiritual movement and a larger coalition promoting peace education worldwide. She is frequently referred to as the “Mother of Peace.” Preventing her from traveling based on vague charges severely damages her movement’s international activities and disrupts its normal operations.

Korea replicates a familiar pattern seen in other countries. First, measures limiting religious liberty are enforced against unpopular groups stigmatized as “cults,” gathering easy support from the media. Once established, legal provisions allowing the states to interfere in the internal organization of religious bodies, scrutinize their finances, and limit their right to collect donations and campaign on social issues with political ramifications are enforced against all religions, particularly those that the politicians in power do not like for whatever reason. Religions that dissent are threatened with dissolution or liquidation.

The international freedom of religion community has watched with concern in the last few months the unfolding of a religious liberty crisis in Japan, where a court has rendered on March 25 a first-degree verdict dissolving the Family Federation and liquidating all assets (an appeal is pending), a campaign is ongoing targeting the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the request by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief that she may visit Japan to examine the situation has been ignored. A parallel and potentially even more serious crisis is now developing in Korea.

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• Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist of religions, is the former Representative of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions.

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