

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: In S Korea's Climate of Suspicion Peace = Politics?

Knut Holdhus  
December 24, 2025



[Mother Han](#) at the Sunhak Peace Prize award ceremony April 11, 2025 in Seoul. The Sunhak Peace Prize is one of numerois peace projects she and her late husband [Sun Myung Moon](#) founded



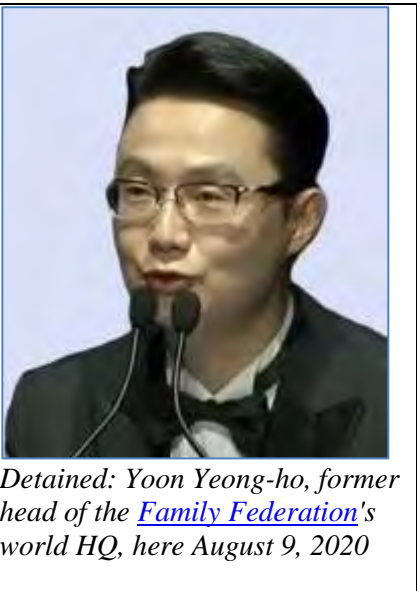
Segye Ilbo

Attempts to trap Family Federation in a narrative of suspicion as decades old peace legacy is being recast as political maneuvering

The South Korean daily newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#) published on 24th December an opinion piece titled "[Moving Beyond the Narrative Frame Toward Peace, A Paradox Emerging from the Family Federation's Crisis](#)".



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)



Detained: Yoon Yeong-ho, former head of the [Family Federation's](#) world HQ, here August 9, 2020

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Religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) points out that in recent months, the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) – also called the [Unification Church](#) – has found itself at the center of an unprecedented crisis. [Founded](#) in South Korea in 1954 by Reverend [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명), the movement has long positioned itself as a

religious organization devoted to global peace, [family values](#), and international cooperation.

Today, however, it faces the most severe challenge in its history. Its leader [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), also called [Mother Han](#), and a former leader have been detained for months on allegations related to illegal political funding. Public debate has escalated to the point where even the dissolution of the [organization](#) as a religious body is being discussed.

In his [opinion piece](#), Jeong writes,

"Recently, a senior pastor who served the [Family Federation](#) in pastoral ministry for 47 years published a

piece in Paris titled 'Regrets over the [Unification Church](#) Gate'. In it, he stated that during his lifetime, Reverend [Sun Myung Moon](#) strictly and categorically prohibited any financial transactions with politicians, treating this as an inviolable principle."

For the millions of members worldwide, the situation is both shocking and painful. They see themselves not as political operatives, but as believers who have participated in peace initiatives, humanitarian projects, and interfaith efforts in alignment with their religious convictions and, often, in cooperation with government policies aimed at stability and reconciliation.

The central difficulty the [Family Federation](#) now faces is what the [article](#) describes as a "frame" – specifically, a narrative frame of church-state collusion. Once such a frame takes hold in public discourse, every activity, regardless of intent or historical context, tends to be interpreted through that lens. Explanations are dismissed as self-serving, and long-standing peace initiatives are reinterpreted as political maneuvering. This is the environment in which the current controversy is unfolding.



To understand why the [Family Federation](#) ever engaged with political leaders at all, the [article](#) argues that one must return to the original worldview of its co-founder, [Reverend Moon](#). His approach to politics was not rooted in a desire for power or influence in the conventional sense, but in a broader philosophical vision of peace. [Reverend Moon](#) believed that lasting peace could not be achieved through political systems alone, nor through religion acting in isolation. Instead, he saw religion and politics as complementary spheres that must cooperate while maintaining distinct roles.

In his conceptual framework, religion represented the "mind" of society – the source of moral values, conscience, and ultimate purpose – while politics and economics represented the "body", responsible for implementing policies and managing material

realities. Just as a healthy individual requires harmony between mind and body, [Reverend Moon](#) believed that a peaceful world required moral guidance and political authority to work together, centered on universal ethical principles.

This perspective shaped his view of Korea's role in the world. Emerging from colonialism, war, and ideological division, South Korea stood at the fault line between communism and capitalism. [Reverend Moon](#) argued that Korea had a unique historical mission: to overcome ideological conflict not by choosing one extreme over another, but by articulating a higher, [God](#)-centered ethic emphasizing mutual coexistence, shared prosperity, and justice. In his view, this approach could resolve internal polarization within South Korea, enable peaceful reunification with the North, and ultimately position Korea as a model for global peace.



*From the science conference in Seoul in November 1981 where [Father Moon](#) suggested the Japan-Korea tunnel*

The [article](#) also emphasizes that [Reverend Moon](#)'s peace vision extended far beyond abstract theology. One of his most ambitious ideas was that physical connectivity – literally building roads and bridges between nations – could help dismantle psychological and political barriers. This belief culminated in the proposal of an "International Peace Highway", first introduced in 1981 at a major global science conference in Seoul attended by hundreds of scholars, including Nobel Prize winners.

The idea was bold: begin with an "Asian Peace Highway" linking China, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan, and then expand it into a global network connecting continents. Most famously, this included the concept of an [undersea tunnel](#) between Korea and Japan. While such a project might sound utopian, the proposal attracted serious attention from respected academics, engineers, and policymakers. For them, the appeal lay not only in infrastructure development, but in the project's symbolic and practical potential to foster reconciliation, economic cooperation, and long-term stability in a historically tense region.

Importantly, Reverend Moon did not treat this vision as mere rhetoric. Organizations were established to study feasibility, conduct research, and gather expert input. Prominent figures in Japan and South Korea – from polar explorers and university professors to civil engineers and former government officials – participated in these discussions. Over time, the idea gained enough legitimacy that multiple heads of state in South Korea publicly referenced it as one possible avenue for improving relations with Japan. Japanese political leaders, too, expressed interest and even suggested alternative names to emphasize its international character.

	
<i>Lee Myung-bak - President of South Korea 2008 - 2013</i>	<i>Roh Moo-hyun - President of South Korea 2003 - 2008</i>
	
<i>Kim Dae-jung - President of South Korea 1998 - 2003</i>	<i>Roh Tae-woo (1932-2021), President of South Korea 1987-1993</i>

The [Segye Ilbo article](#) points out that as deliberations on the Korea-Japan [undersea tunnel](#) progressed, political attention increased accordingly. In South Korea, Presidents Roh Tae-woo (노태우), Kim Dae-jung (김대중), Roh Moo-hyun (노무현), and Lee Myung-bak (이명박) each referred to the project as a potential instrument for advancing Korea-Japan reconciliation.

In Japan, Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori (森 喜朗) went so far as to suggest calling it the "ASEM Tunnel." Numerous political leaders, including former Justice Minister Daizo Nozawa (野沢 太三) and Takeo Kawamura (河村 建夫), secretary-general of the Japan-Korea Parliamentarians' Union, likewise expressed strong support for the concept.

From the perspective presented in the [article](#), this history is crucial. The engagement between the [Family Federation](#) and political figures did not emerge from partisan

ambitions or covert influence, but from long-term peace projects that inherently required governmental cooperation. Large-scale infrastructure, international reconciliation, and regional integration are, by definition, impossible without dialogue with political authorities.


<i>Yoshiro Mori, Prime Minister of Japan 2000-2001</i>

This does not mean, the [article](#) cautions, that any unlawful or unethical behavior should be excused. Allegations of improper financial dealings must be investigated and judged on their own merits. However, the author argues that it is a mistake to conflate the entirety of the [Family Federation's](#) peace-oriented vision with specific accusations against individuals. To do so risks discarding decades of intellectual, moral, and practical efforts aimed at reducing conflict and fostering cooperation.

[Jeong's article](#) appeals to a broader historical perspective. Many of humanity's most transformative achievements – from international institutions to cross-border infrastructure – began as controversial dreams. They were often criticized, misunderstood, or dismissed before becoming part of accepted reality. Regardless of how the current legal and political disputes conclude, the aspiration for peace that motivated these initiatives should not be abandoned. Dreams of cooperation, reconciliation, and shared prosperity, the

author reminds us, are not naïve indulgences. They are the starting point of nearly all meaningful human progress.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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investigation? Is it intended to hold specific individuals accountable for concrete unlawful acts, or is it drifting toward putting an entire religious movement on trial in the court of public opinion? This distinction matters profoundly, not only for the [Family Federation](#) but for the health of democratic governance itself.

from video by [FF-WPU](#)

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In democratic societies, investigations into corruption or abuse of power are both legitimate and necessary. According to the [Segye Ilbo](#), when political authority, financial resources, and social influence intersect in opaque or improper ways, rigorous scrutiny is a form of institutional self-correction. However, democracies are also built on clear limits – limits that define who may be investigated, on what grounds, and with what protections. The **danger arises when those limits blur and suspicion expands from individual wrongdoing to collective blame.**



The Constitution of the Republic of Korea. Here, the first version enacted in 1948. Photo: [NZ 토끼들](#) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#)

South Korea's constitution, like those of many Western democracies, enshrines two principles that must coexist: the separation of religion and state, and the freedom of religion. These principles are often misunderstood as being in tension with one another. In fact, they are mutually reinforcing. **The separation of church and state is not designed to suppress or marginalize religion, but to prevent political power from exploiting religious belief for its own ends.** At the same time, freedom of religion protects individuals and communities from being targeted or penalized simply because of their faith.

The concern raised in the [article](#) by Jeong Seong-su is that much of the political language surrounding the proposed special prosecutor has begun to frame the [Family Federation](#) itself – not merely particular actors within it – as a suspect entity. When an entire [religious organization](#) is casually described as a “political intervention group” or the central player in a scandal,

democratic norms are placed under strain.

In Western historical memory, such generalizations evoke uncomfortable precedents, where religious minorities became convenient symbols of broader political anxieties.

If evidence exists that unlawful political donations were made, or that certain individuals engaged in improper exchanges with those in power, then



**Stereotyping Catholics as trying to take over the world.** Here, a colored version of the “Whore of Babylon” illustration from Martin Luther's 1534 translation of the Bible. The term refers to both a symbolic female figure and a place of evil as mentioned in the Book of Revelation of the New Testament. She is described more fully in Revelation 17:5 as “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth”. Leading reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox taught that the figure represented the Catholic Church. Author: From the workshop of Lucas Cranach. [Public domain](#) image.

accountability should be clear, narrow, and personal. **Responsibility in democratic legal systems attaches to actions taken by identifiable individuals, not to religious labels or group affiliations.** To suggest otherwise – **to imply that millions of ordinary believers must bear suspicion or social stigma simply because they share a religious identity – amounts to a form of collective punishment.** Such an approach undermines the presumption of innocence and risks normalizing discrimination.

The human consequences of this shift in tone should not be underestimated. When religious organizations are publicly framed as politically suspect, **ordinary believers often pay the price.** People begin to question whether they should conceal their faith at work, in schools, or within their local communities. They may face subtle exclusion, reputational harm, or open hostility, despite having no connection whatsoever to political decision-making or financial misconduct. From a democratic perspective, this outcome is deeply troubling.

The [article](#) also raises a broader critique of political behavior itself. It asks whether politics truly acts as a guardian of democratic pluralism or whether it treats religion instrumentally – embracing it when useful and discarding it when expedient. When religion is viewed primarily as something to be “managed”, “controlled”, or sacrificed during moments of political crisis, it ceases to function as a space of conscience and moral conviction. Instead, it becomes another tool within the machinery of power.



**Advancing ambitious ideals and large-scale infrastructure visions:** Here, from a proposed tunnel between South Korea and Japan: the entrance to the exploratory shaft in Karatsu on the southern island of Kyushu,

For decades, the [Family Federation](#) has publicly advanced ambitious ideals, including national reconciliation, global peace, and international cooperation in the post-Cold War era. Its activities – such as promoting international conferences, unofficial diplomacy, or large-scale infrastructure visions – are undeniably controversial and invite debate. In pluralistic societies, such debate is not only acceptable but healthy. However, controversy alone does not constitute criminality. To retroactively reinterpret all such initiatives as mere profit-seeking schemes or political lobbying efforts risks erasing the sincerity of belief that motivates many participants.

Japan. Photo: [International Highway Foundation](#)

As the special prosecutor process moves forward, the political environment is likely to become even more polarized. Progressive and conservative factions may weaponize the issue against one another, with little incentive to protect a [religious organization](#) that offers no clear electoral advantage. In such a climate, the [Family Federation](#) risks becoming politically isolated – criticized by one side as an object of reform or eradication and used by the other merely as a tactical device. Neither posture offers genuine protection.

Given this reality, [Jeong's article](#) argues that seeking salvation through political alliances is neither realistic nor wise. Instead, the most durable source of protection lies in principles rather than personalities. Constitutional guarantees, legal standards of individual responsibility, the presumption of innocence, and established human-rights norms form institutional barriers that are harder to erode than political goodwill. These are the same safeguards that protect any religious or ideological minority when public sentiment turns hostile.

The conclusion drawn is both pragmatic and normative. The [Family Federation](#), rather than searching for powerful patrons, should insist on clear boundaries: investigations may proceed, but **accountability must remain individual; faith itself must not be criminalized**; and **no precedent should be set in which an entire religion is sacrificed to satisfy political pressure**. Governments change, administrations come and go, but democratic dignity depends on upholding these limits consistently.

Ultimately, the argument is not a plea for immunity, but a defense of democratic discipline. In moments of political turbulence, the true test of democracy lies not in how aggressively it pursues suspicion, but in how faithfully it preserves principles. Holding fast to those principles, the article suggests, is the most sober and dignified path forward – not only for the [Family Federation](#) and its believers, but for the integrity of democratic society as a whole.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

**Featured image** above: A quote from religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in [Segye Ilbo](#) 22nd Dec. 2025. Photo (2025): [Segye Ilbo](#)

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