

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: In S Korea Only Some Religions Are Allowed in Politics

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December 26, 2025



Kim Dae-jung - President of South Korea 1998 - 2003, cutting the celebration cake with [Father Moon](#), [Mother Han](#), and Lee Sang-hwe, February 1, 1999 at the 10th anniversary of [Segye Ilbo](#)

세계일보

The logo of the Segye Ilbo



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su

Religion, politics, and the question of fair standards:
Engagement is not corruption – defending legitimate church-state dialogue

On 26th December, the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) printed a column by religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) headlined "[Not Church-State Collusion, but Church-State Cooperation](#)".

See also [Climate of Suspicion: Peace Reframed as Politics](#)

Jeong points out that in many Western democracies, the phrase "separation of church and state" is often treated as a foundational principle that implies distance, caution, and even suspicion between religion and politics. Yet historically, this separation has rarely meant absolute disengagement. Across civilizations, religion and politics have coexisted as two central forces shaping moral values, laws, institutions, and collective identity. The Korean debate examined in this commentary is not an anomaly; rather, it reflects a broader global tension over where legitimate cooperation ends and improper collusion begins.

The [Segye Ilbo article](#) argues that religion and politics have never existed in isolation from one another. From ancient

empires to modern democracies, political systems have organized societies through laws and institutions, while religions have offered ethical direction, meaning, and visions of the common good. Political leaders and religious figures meeting one another has therefore been historically normal, not inherently problematic. The key concern, the author stresses, is not contact itself but corruption – specifically, transactions involving money, coercion, or illegitimate political influence.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the contemporary controversy in South Korea, particularly regarding the [Family Federation](#). While politicians' interactions with mainstream religious groups such as Buddhist orders, Catholic institutions, and Protestant churches are widely accepted – even celebrated as

symbols of national unity – similar interactions with the [Family Federation](#) are often immediately labeled as "church-state collusion." The [article](#) challenges this double standard and asks why one religion is treated as inherently suspect while others are granted presumptive legitimacy.



Jesus: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" (Mark 12:17). Here, 2024-recreation of Christ based on the Shroud of Turin. Author: Jesus Christ

To make this point, the author places the issue in a broader religious and historical context. Founders of major world religions did not reject politics outright. Reporter Jeong writes,

"Jesus acknowledged state authority by saying, 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto [God](#) what is [God](#)'s,' while clearly warning against encroachment on the realm of faith. The Buddha emphasized discussion and consensus within the community through the teaching of the Seven Principles of Non-Decline (七不 衰法), and Muhammad regarded governance itself as a responsibility entrusted by [God](#)."

In different ways, all recognized that political power directly affects human suffering and well-being and therefore cannot be ignored by religion. What they warned against was not engagement, but subservience – religion becoming a tool of power, or power exploiting religion for selfish ends.

Korea's modern history reflects this longstanding entanglement. Presidents routinely meet religious leaders, attend worship services during major holidays, and participate in religiously affiliated

cultural or charitable events. Jeong includes,

"This Christmas as well, the president visited a Catholic cathedral, while leaders of both ruling and opposition parties attended church services."



President of the Republic of Korea Kim Dae-jung, here on Feb. 27, 2001

Government funding supports Buddhist temples under cultural preservation laws and Catholic institutions under welfare policy frameworks. These practices are institutionalized, normalized, and rarely questioned. In fact, they are often framed positively – as expressions of inclusivity, heritage, or social cohesion.

The controversy arises when similar practices involve the [Family Federation](#). According to the article, even in cases where no illegal financial transactions have been proven, mere association with the [Federation](#) triggers suspicion. Photographs of meetings, attendance at events, or references to long-standing policy ideas associated with the [Federation](#) are interpreted as evidence of impropriety. Meanwhile, equivalent actions involving other religious groups are dismissed as routine or benign.

The author argues that this discrepancy does not stem from legal reasoning but from what he calls an "asymmetry of trust". Religions that are deeply embedded in the social and institutional mainstream benefit from historical familiarity. Their political interactions are perceived as natural extensions of tradition. By contrast, religious movements that have been controversial or stigmatized – even if legally recognized – are judged by a harsher moral standard. The same behavior, when performed by different actors, is read entirely differently. This, the [article](#) suggests, reveals not principled secularism, but selective prejudice.

To underscore this point, the author invokes historical examples involving respected political leaders. Former President Kim Dae-jung (김대중), a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and widely admired democratic figure, openly participated in events hosted by organizations affiliated with the [Family Federation](#) in both opposition and presidential roles. He publicly greeted the founders of the [religious organization](#) and expressed favorable views on large-scale infrastructure ideas long promoted by the [movement](#), such as a proposed [undersea tunnel](#) between Korea and Japan. At the time, these actions were framed as discussions about national development and international cooperation, not religious collusion.



Official Portrait of Roh Moo-hyun, the 16th President of the Republic of Korea (2003)

Similarly, former President Roh Moo-hyun (노무현) visited a [Family Federation](#)-owned automobile factory in North Korea during an official trip, treating it as part of broader inter-Korean economic engagement. Again, the visit did not provoke accusations of improper church-state relations. These examples illustrate the article's central question: if such actions were acceptable in the past, why are similar actions today treated as presumptive evidence of wrongdoing?

The author's answer is that the actions themselves have not fundamentally changed; the political and media climate surrounding them has. Shifting public narratives, heightened polarization, and intensified scrutiny of certain religious organizations have transformed previously neutral or positive interactions into symbols of alleged corruption. In this environment, association alone becomes grounds for condemnation, regardless of intent or legality.

The [article](#) concludes with a broader reflection relevant far beyond South Korea. Governing a society requires more than laws and bureaucratic procedures. Political systems also rely on moral narratives, long-term vision, and social trust – areas where religious institutions often possess unique resources. When politics exploits religion for private gain, serious problems arise. But preventing all dialogue or cooperation between religion and politics, the author argues, is neither realistic nor desirable.

Especially in an era marked by demographic decline, social fragmentation, and global instability, the [Segye Ilbo article](#) suggests that carefully balanced cooperation – maintaining institutional distance while allowing ethical dialogue – can strengthen social resilience. The true challenge, then, is not how to eliminate interaction between religion and politics, but how to apply consistent standards of fairness, legality, and intent, regardless of which religion is involved.

In that sense, the debate is not merely about one religious organization or one country. It raises a universal question for pluralistic societies: can we distinguish principled secular governance from selective suspicion, and cooperation for the common good from corruption masquerading as morality?

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evidence that would constitute legitimate grounds for dissolution. That is why they resorted to such actions.

– The claims of the so-called “victims”, including fabricated affidavits from former members, follow the logic and patterns created by the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* (commonly known as the *National Lawyers Network*).

To begin with, the *National Lawyers Network* is not a neutral organization, yet it has been brought into MEXT as an advisor. Even the fabricated affidavits follow the same writing patterns that the Network has used in documents it has produced in the past.

– Media organizations that routinely claim it is their mission to monitor government and power and to report in a neutral and fair manner have instead continued one-sided attacks on the *Family Federation*.

Regrettably, in the push to dissolve the *Family Federation*, the media, the state, and government ministries are all perfectly aligned in the same direction. When I wrote the chapter titled “MEXT’s Suppression of Speech”, I was reminded of GHQ’s press code, the “Press Code for Japan” (*Nihon ni atauru shinbun junkoku*). Although GHQ guaranteed freedom of speech and expression under the Japanese Constitution that it itself helped draft, it did not allow publication of anything inconvenient to GHQ.

As if an invisible press code now blankets society as a whole, the media has stopped even attempting neutral reporting on the *Family Federation*. This is because there is blatant speech suppression by MEXT, and free reporting on matters related to the *Family Federation* can no longer be expected.

– In such circumstances, the judiciary should be the last line of defense.

Before the *first-instance ruling* was issued, many legal experts believed that the likelihood of a dissolution order being granted was low. I am not a legal expert, but having reviewed court materials from numerous lawsuits involving the *Family Federation*, and having seen many cases that appeared to be unjust rulings, I consistently said there was no room for optimism. Even so, I have never seen a judgment as terrible as that one. It is little more than sophistry, hair-splitting, and nitpicking.

– Courts, which are supposed to render strict and impartial judgments, are piling inference upon inference.

Since the 2009 compliance declaration [See editor’s note 1 below], the number of “victims” has declined markedly. The decision itself acknowledges that “the number of damage claims in recent times has decreased considerably.” Nevertheless, it goes on to say that it is “assumed” that there are “a considerable number” of latent, hidden victims. A court that should be making judgments based on evidence is instead relying on speculation to issue its ruling. One cannot help but wonder what has become of the Japanese judiciary.

– Do Japanese people have a negative image of religion?

To begin with, the word “religion” does not leave a very positive impression on many Japanese people. I was the same way myself, and especially when it comes to new religious movements, people tend to see them as suspicious. It is not easy to dispel such impressions. Moreover, the Aum Shinrikyo incident was decisive. The impact that incident had on society was enormous, and it firmly entrenched an unfavorable image of religion.

It is said that people do not listen to the *religious organization*’s side because its members are “mind-controlled” [See editor’s note 2 below], but the concept of mind control is no longer used in the West, where it is regarded as pseudoscience.

For those opposed to the *Family Federation*, “mind control” [See editor’s note 2 below] has become a power word – a convenient magic phrase. Believers are mind-controlled; therefore, it is acceptable to abduct and confine them. The courts believe this as well.

Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto (福本修也), counsel for the *religious organization*, has forcefully explained that mind control [See editor’s note 2 below] does not exist, so the term itself does not appear in the *judgment*. However, it has simply been replaced with different wording that conveys almost exactly the same idea. When it comes to religion, Japan has now completely fallen away from the standards of advanced Western nations.

See also part 1: *Dissolution, System of Faith-Breaking, Lawsuits*

Featured image above: Masumi Fukuda (福田 ますみ) – Born in 1956 in Yokohama City. Nonfiction writer. Winner of the 6th Shincho Documentary Award for Fabrication.



GHQ (General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) around 1950. After World War II, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), a role held by General Douglas MacArthur from 1945 to 1951, was responsible for overseeing the occupation and reconstruction of Japan. The SCAP had broad authority and was tasked with implementing the terms of Japan’s surrender and facilitating its transition into a peaceful, democratic nation. Key responsibilities included demilitarization, democratization, economic reconstruction, war crime trials, social reforms, rehabilitation and reconstruction. The occupation formally ended in 1952 with the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco, which restored Japan’s sovereignty. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. *Public domain image*



Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto, here at press conference on 8th

of the International Documentary Award for Fabrication.

The Truth Behind the Fukuoka "Murderous Teacher" Case (Shinchosha). In 2024, she received the U.S. Wilbur Award, which is given for outstanding reporting on religion. Her other works include *Russia, the*

Assassination State: Pursuing the Journalists Who Were Silenced (Shinchosha) and *The True Face of Political Correctness (Hojo-sha).* Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

September 2023. Photo: Screenshot from video by [FFWPU](#)

[Editor's note 1: The 2009 compliance declaration of the Unification Church of Japan (now the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)) was a formal commitment by the organization to reform its practices in response to longstanding public criticism and legal challenges.

The Unification Church in Japan had faced numerous allegations related to recruitment tactics and donation solicitation, termed "spiritual sales" (霊感商法) by a hostile network of activist lawyers who had declared the religious organization an enemy. These issues led to multiple lawsuits orchestrated by the activist lawyers and significant media backlash. This prompted the organization to take measures to restore its reputation and demonstrate compliance with legal and ethical standards.

The religious organization pledged to stop possibly unethical donation practices, including what the hostile network of lawyers claimed amounted to "pressuring members into making large financial contributions under spiritual pretexts."

This was in response to accusations from the same activist lawyers that followers "were being manipulated into giving away substantial amounts of money or property."

The Unification Church stated it would enhance internal oversight to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards. Measures included better training for leaders and stricter guidelines for evangelization and solicitation of donations.

After this compliance declaration, there was a significant decrease in the number of lawsuits against the Unification Church – since 2015 called the [Family Federation](#). The religious organization has used this as evidence that it has improved its practices and should not be subject to dissolution.]

[Editor's note 2: In Japan, the "mind-control" myth has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or "brainwash" their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The "mind-control" myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive "deprogramming" of believers – sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan's preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the Unification Church. A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived "mind-control" rhetoric to explain the Church's fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan's restrictive religious climate. Overall, the "mind-control" myth functions less as a scientific or psychological concept and more as a moral panic – a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

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