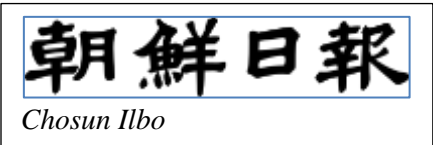


FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Can Korean Religion and Politics Be Untangled?

Knut Holdhus
January 5, 2026



Featured image above: South Korean politics with the Lee Jae-myung administration going after several religious organizations for allegedly influencing politics. Illustration of politician and praying couple by Grok xAI.



Ruling Democratic Party wants to make large special prosecutor probe even bigger, fueling new political showdown in South Korea

On 5th January, the large South Korean daily Chosun Ilbo ran a news item which in English would be headlined "[With 'Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Bill to Be Handled at the Plenary Session on the 8th', Unification Church Probe Likely to Be Delayed](#)".

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Min Jung-gi, the head of a huge team of special prosecutors with extensive investigative powers who have already sent several religious leaders to long-term pre-trial detention. Image generated by Chat GPT

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The [article](#) written by Yoo Jong-heon (유종헌) reports on a significant political and legal confrontation unfolding in South Korea at the start of 2026, centered on the ruling Democratic Party of Korea's push to launch new special prosecutor investigations. To understand the stakes, it is important first to clarify what "special prosecutors" are in the South Korean context and why they are politically sensitive.

In South Korea, a special prosecutor (often shortened to "special counsel" in English-language reporting) is an independent investigative body established by legislation to probe allegations that are considered too politically sensitive or complex to be handled solely by ordinary prosecutors.

These investigations typically target high-ranking officials, ruling-party figures, or matters involving alleged abuse of state power. Because special prosecutors are created by law and staffed separately from the regular prosecution service, their establishment almost always reflects intense partisan conflict.

The "second comprehensive special prosecutor bill" referenced in the [article](#) is an especially expansive proposal. It is called "comprehensive" because it consolidates multiple unresolved or controversial allegations into a single investigative framework rather than addressing them one by one. According to the Democratic Party's proposal, this second comprehensive investigation would cover 14 separate allegations and operate for up to 170 days with a staff of as many as 156 investigators, making it one of the largest special prosecutor efforts in recent years.

This proposed investigation follows three earlier special prosecutor probes – into an alleged insurrection, allegations involving former first lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), and issues related to the Marine Corps – that concluded in late 2025.



According to the Chosun Ilbo, the Democratic Party argues that those earlier investigations were incomplete or insufficient and therefore justifies reopening or expanding scrutiny through a second, broader inquiry. The opposition People Power Party, by contrast, criticizes the proposal as politically motivated, characterizing it as a "special prosecutor for local elections" designed to damage conservative candidates ahead of upcoming regional contests.

Alongside this sweeping investigation, the Democratic Party is also attempting to pass a more targeted bill commonly referred to as the "[Unification Church](#)-Shincheonji special prosecutor". This bill focuses on allegations that certain religious organizations engaged in improper lobbying, political donations, or election interference involving politicians from both major parties.

The [Unification Church](#) – often known in the West for its [mass weddings](#) and founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) – is a religious movement [established](#) in South Korea more than 70 years ago, and which has since spread throughout the world. For 30 years, it has the name [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), but many still call it by its former name.

Recent allegations suggest that figures associated with the [Federation](#) may have provided money or other benefits to politicians, prompting police searches and seizures, including at the office of a former cabinet minister. These allegations have raised questions about undue religious influence on politics.



The Shincheonji Peace Palace in Cheongpyeong-myeon, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea 2020



Sungdo Gate, Yeoju Temple of Daesoon Jinrihoe, Yeoju, South Korea (2017)

Shincheonji (신천지), the second group named in the bill, is a new religious movement founded in the 1980s and widely known outside Korea due to its alleged role in the early spread of COVID-19 in the country. Unlike the [Family Federation](#), Shincheonji is not directly implicated in the current lobbying allegations. Its inclusion in the bill is therefore politically contentious. Critics argue that Shincheonji is being added to broaden the scope of the investigation to include past claims that the group attempted to influence internal party primary elections, particularly within the conservative People Power Party.

This expansion is a key reason that negotiations between the parties have stalled. Originally, the idea of a [Family Federation](#)-focused investigation was supported by conservative lawmakers and a minor reform party. However, once the Democratic Party agreed to proceed, the bill was rebranded to include Shincheonji as well. The People Power Party now insists that if Shincheonji is to be investigated, then another religious organization – Daesoon Jinrihoe (대순진리회) – should also be included.

Complicating matters further, President Lee has instructed authorities to consider forming a joint police-prosecutor task force to look into the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji allegations, potentially reducing the need for a separate special prosecutor. This move signals the executive branch's awareness of public concern while also suggesting caution about

launching yet another large-scale independent investigation.

Procedurally, the Democratic Party aims to move both the second comprehensive special prosecutor bill and the religious-organization-related bill through the National Assembly's Legislation and Judiciary Committee between 5th and 7th January, with the goal of passing them at the plenary session on 8th January – the first full parliamentary session of the new year.

However, party leaders have acknowledged that agreement on the [Unification Church](#)-Shincheonji bill may not be reached in time. If talks fail, negotiations may be postponed until after the Democratic Party elects a new floor leader on 11th January.

The [Chosun Ilbo article](#) illustrates how legal mechanisms designed to ensure accountability – special prosecutors – have become central instruments of partisan struggle in South Korea. The dispute is not only about alleged corruption or religious influence but also about who controls the narrative ahead of elections, how far investigations should reach, and whether religion and politics can realistically be disentangled in a highly polarized environment.

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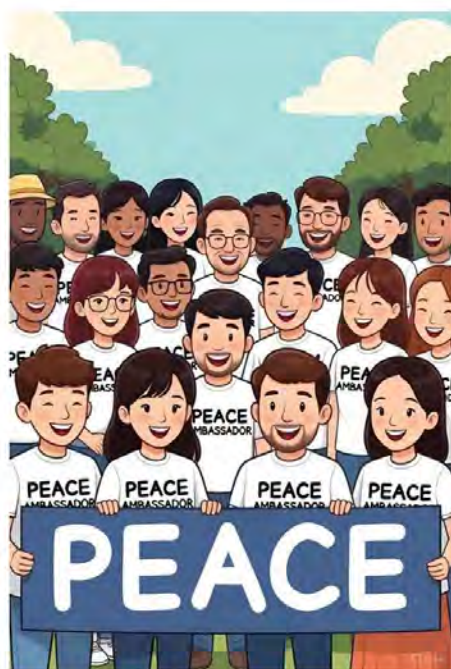
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Peace Ambassador Program Is Civic, Not Political

- January 3, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



In response to media allegations of political involvement, South Korean *Peace Ambassador Council* issues statement on political neutrality of its civic peace program

A statement issued by the [Family Federation](#) in South Korea to the media on 3rd January 2026. Translated from the [text on the Korean language website](#) of the [Family Federation](#).

Rebuttal to the 2nd January 2026

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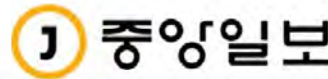
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With regard to the JoongAng Ilbo report dated 2nd January 2026, titled "Are Unification Church Peace Ambassadors Political Ambassadors? Some Even Served as General Election Campaign Headquarters Chiefs," the

Peace Ambassadors Council hereby provides the following explanation of the facts and respectfully requests that members of the press refer to this statement when producing balanced and accurate coverage.



Logo of the large South Korean daily newspaper JoongAng Ilbo

the following explanation of the facts and respectfully requests that members of the press refer to this statement when producing balanced and accurate coverage.

First, Peace Ambassadors are not positions for political activity or political intervention.

The Peace Ambassador program is not a system of "political ambassadors", but rather a symbolic role within a civic peace movement.

Peace Ambassadors are appointed as non-standing, unpaid, honorary positions from among regional opinion leaders who have practiced public service and social responsibility across various sectors, including politics, business, academia, the media, religion, and civil society. The purpose of the program is to form a network for a **civic peace movement** that promotes the values of peace, service, and sharing beyond nationality, ideology, and religion. Peace Ambassadors have served as partners in **civic peace efforts** by practicing a **life of service** within their local communities. Defining this role as a tool for political collusion or the pursuit of vested interests disparages decades of **voluntary peace activities** carried out within civil society.



Not getting involved in **South Korean politics**. Illustration: Grok xAI, 3rd January 2026

Second, linking individual Peace Ambassadors' personal political activities to organizational political involvement is a distortion of the facts.

Even if an individual appointed as a Peace Ambassador participated in political activities or an election campaign in a personal capacity, such actions represent that individual's own judgment and conduct. There has been no instance in which the organization instructed, directed, or was systematically involved in such activities. The *Peace Ambassadors Council* clearly states that it has never, at the organizational level, supported, assisted, or intervened in favor of any specific political party, politician, or election.

Third, the Peace Ambassadors Council is a purely civilian peace NGO that has consistently adhered to the principle of political neutrality.

The *Peace Ambassadors Council* has carried out civic-level peace initiatives centered on public issues such as peace on the Korean Peninsula, international cooperation, environmental concerns, and family values. Instances in which political figures attended public events hosted by the *Peace Ambassadors Council* to deliver congratulatory remarks or participate in discussions fall within the normal scope of civil society activities in which private organizations provide forums for public discourse.

Fourth, reporting that links the Peace Ambassador

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program to political donations or illegal lobbying is deeply regrettable.

The Peace Ambassadors Council has never approved or condoned any organized activity that violates political fundraising laws. Claims that Peace Ambassadors were used as conduits for political donations seriously distort the organization's official structure and operating principles. We also express deep concern over the amplification and repetition of **speculative reporting** that is inconsistent with the facts.

The Peace Ambassadors Council will continue to firmly uphold the principles of political neutrality and transparency, grounded in the conscience of citizens and the trust of the international community, and will steadfastly fulfill its mission as a **responsible civil society organization**.

We further request that, in carrying out its essential role of public-interest criticism and oversight, the media adopt a more cautious and balanced approach when reporting on matters that generalize individual cases or distort the essential character of an organization.

2nd January 2026

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External Relations Headquarters,
Korean Branch of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification

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South Korean Politics: HQ of main opposition party, People Power Party (PPP), being raided by special prosecutors. Illustration: Grok xAI, August 2025. Edited.

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