

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: S Korea's State Coercion of Religion

Knut Holdhus
January 12, 2026



Artistic impression of President Lee Jae-myung and South Korean religious leaders. Illustration: Grok xAI

세계일보
Segye Ilbo



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

South Korean daily warns of religion being invoked as justification for severe measures and the use of state coercion against religion deemed by Lee administration as undesirable

If we translated a headline in the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo 12th January it would say, "[A Dangerous Moment: Undermining State Authority in the Name of Religion](#)". This headline does not mean that religion itself is attacking the state. Rather, it implies that religion is being invoked as justification ("in the name of religion"), to influence, pressure, or destabilize state authority.

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On 12th January 2026, a piece of news emerged from South Korea that, at first glance, might have seemed routine: the president hosted a luncheon at the Blue House (the South Korean equivalent of the White House), inviting senior leaders from various religious communities. Such meetings are not unusual in Korea, where religious organizations – Buddhist, Protestant, Catholic, and others – have long played visible roles in social welfare, moral discourse, and public life.

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su, authored the [opinion piece](#). According to him, what transpired at this meeting, as reported by the press, raised deeply unsettling questions about the boundaries between religion and state power in a democratic society. As stated in the media reports, prominent religious leaders jointly identified specific religious organizations as "pseudo-religions", characterized them as socially harmful, and formally urged the government to dissolve them and confiscate their assets. Even more alarming was the president's reported response: an expression of sympathy with these demands, coupled with the remark that the damage caused by such groups had been "left unattended for far too

long".



According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as "pseudo-religion": the Shincheonji Church of Jesus



According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as "pseudo-religion": the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)



Being judged by the court of public opinion. Illustration: Chat GPT, 12th January 2026.

If these accounts are accurate, South Korea now faces a profoundly serious constitutional and democratic dilemma – one that resonates far beyond its borders.

Jeong emphasizes that in a democratic republic, religion does not stand above the state, nor does it function as a judicial authority. Religious leaders may offer moral guidance, ethical reflection, or social criticism, but they do not possess the legitimate power to declare organizations illegal, to issue verdicts, or to demand punishment. Those functions belong exclusively to the legal system, operating through established procedures, evidence, and due process.

If a particular group – religious or otherwise – has committed crimes, it is the responsibility of prosecutors and courts to investigate, judge, and, if necessary, punish wrongdoing. When religious figures publicly label a group a "social harm" and demand its dissolution and the seizure of its property, they step beyond moral counsel and into the realm of quasi-judicial judgment. When the head of the executive branch appears to endorse such language, the issue ceases to be an internal debate within religious circles and becomes a matter of constitutional neutrality and the rule of law.

The [Segye Ilbo opinion piece](#) points out something it finds especially troubling. It is a suggestion, reportedly voiced at this meeting, that "the public would also agree" with dissolving religious organizations deemed harmful to the state or the people. This framing implies that majority sentiment can replace constitutional safeguards, legal standards, and due process. But democracy, properly understood, is not rule by popular emotion. It is a system deliberately designed to limit power – precisely to protect minorities, dissenters, and unpopular groups from the passions or fears of the majority.

South Korean history offers sobering reminders of how vague accusations such as "harmful to the state" have been weaponized. During authoritarian periods in the twentieth century, such language was repeatedly used to justify repression, censorship, and imprisonment. The lesson is clear: once abstract moral judgments begin to substitute for legal criteria, the door to abuse opens quickly.

The entanglement of religion and political power is not new in Korea. During the Japanese colonial period (1910 - 1945), the colonial authorities enforced participation in Shinto shrine worship as a means of ideological control and assimilation. Religion was compelled to serve the state's demand for loyalty, resulting in deep wounds – collaboration, silence, and lasting internal divisions within religious communities.

Decades later, under President Park Chung-hee (박정희) and his authoritarian Yushin regime from 1972 to 1979, emergency powers and extra-constitutional measures were normalized in the name of national crisis and unity. Once again, political power sought moral legitimacy, and religious institutions were often called upon to provide it. In such moments, religion lost its role as a critical conscience and instead became a decorative moral shield for power. History shows that when religious language bends to political authority, the damage is not temporary; it leaves long-term scars on both faith communities and society as a whole.

One of the gravest dangers religion faces when approaching state power is the temptation to designate an "enemy". At its core, religious language derives its moral force not from punishment

but from self-examination, not from exclusion but from calls to repentance and transformation. When fused with the coercive authority of the state, however, that language can instantly change character. Naming a specific group as a social evil and calling for state intervention draws religion directly into political judgment and enforcement.



Park Chung-hee (1917-1979), a politician and general who served as the third president of South Korea from 1962 after he seized power in a coup the year before, until he was assassinated in 1979

At that point, religion risks no longer being seen as a guardian of conscience standing apart from power, but as an institution that reinforces the moral legitimacy of governmental coercion. This transformation undermines both religious credibility and democratic accountability.

According to religious affairs correspondent Jeong, the call for "asset recovery" is particularly fraught. While it may sound like the language of justice, confiscating property before a judicial ruling directly threatens constitutionally protected rights, including freedom of religion and property rights. Today, such measures are proposed under the label of combating "pseudo-religions". Tomorrow, if this logic becomes normalized, there is no guarantee where the line will be drawn – or who will be next. The rule of law exists precisely to protect even those we find disturbing, offensive, or wrong.

Ironically, the same meeting reportedly included denunciations of xenophobia toward migrants as a "breeding ground for fascism", along with calls to reject hatred from society. This raises an unavoidable question: is the rhetoric that singles out specific religious organizations as a social danger, demanding their dissolution and dispossession, truly unrelated to hatred? Hatred is

not merely a private emotion; it is produced and amplified through power, labels, and authority. Depending on who speaks and from what position, exclusion can easily be repackaged as justice.



Are we seeing personal hatred being amplified through power, labels, and authority? Illustration: Grok xAI

In a constitutional democracy, the president's foremost responsibility is to safeguard the legal and institutional order. Listening respectfully to concerns raised by religious communities is appropriate. Endorsing or echoing demands that blur the line between moral critique and state coercion is not. When those boundaries fade, public trust in both religion and government erodes, and the state is drawn into conflicts it should avoid.

The true danger facing South Korean society is not simply harsh criticism of a particular religious organization. It is the moment when, in the name of religion, the protections of law, freedom, and due process begin to loosen.

When religion loses its critical distance from power, faith itself is compromised – and the state is tempted into perilous choices.

The events of this meeting compel an uncomfortable question: are we, at this moment, standing firmly on the side of constitutional democracy? What unfolded suggests a scene that shakes that confidence – and history warns us to take such moments seriously.

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When Special Prosecutors Become Political Tools

- January 11, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



South Korea's justice system faces a crisis of confidence as special counsel investigations now are becoming common, dominating the country's politics

South Korea's largest English-language daily, *The Korea Herald*, published on 11th January

 **The Korea Herald**

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Min Joong-gi (민중기), the head of a huge team of special prosecutors with extensive investigative powers. Image: Grok xAI, Jan. 2026.

According to the [report](#), the country Korea is currently facing an intense political and legal confrontation that many observers describe as a "special counsel war". At its core, the dispute reflects a deepening crisis of trust in the country's justice system and a growing tendency for political parties to weaponize extraordinary legal mechanisms for partisan advantage.

While the term "special counsel" may be familiar to Western readers through U.S. politics, its role and implications in South Korea carry distinct historical, institutional, and political meanings that help explain why the current situation is so contentious.

In South Korea, a special counsel (or special prosecutor) is an independent investigator appointed by the National Assembly to examine cases that are considered too sensitive or politically charged to be handled by ordinary

prosecutors. These investigations are typically reserved for exceptional circumstances, such as allegations involving sitting or former presidents, senior government officials, or powerful political networks. The logic behind this system is simple: when the public believes that prosecutors – who traditionally fall under the executive branch – cannot act impartially, an independent counsel is meant to restore credibility and public confidence.

However, what was once an extraordinary legal remedy is now at risk of becoming routine. According to the [reporting by The Korea Herald](#), South Korea's National Assembly has entered a phase in which rival political parties are proposing multiple, overlapping special counsel investigations at a rapid pace, even as the results of earlier probes are still being announced. This proliferation has led legal experts and political analysts to warn that the system is being distorted into a partisan tool rather than a safeguard of justice.



2024 logo of the Democratic Party of South Korea. [Public domain](#) image.

At the center of the current conflict are South



국민의힘
PEOPLE POWER PARTY
Logo of the People Power Party

Korea's two main political camps: the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and the main opposition People Power Party (PPP). In recent weeks, both sides have introduced or floated special counsel bills targeting a wide range of alleged misconduct. These proposals come on top of three recently concluded or ongoing special counsel investigations, creating a sense of legislative overload and political escalation.

Particularly striking is the fact that three pending special counsel bills are all related to the [Family Federation](#) – formerly called the [Unification Church](#). The Federation, a religious organization with international reach, is currently facing allegations of involvement in unlawful political funding and election interference. According to [The Korea Herald](#), each bill has been drafted by a different political grouping, reflecting not consensus but competition over how far and how aggressively the investigations should go.



The ruling Democratic Party's proposal is the most expansive. It seeks to investigate not only the [Family Federation](#) but also the [Shincheonji Church of Jesus](#) [See editor's note below], a splinter Christian group that has previously been



The logo of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification

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The logo of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus.

linked to political controversies. The bill targets alleged unlawful campaign donations, improper political influence, and election interference by these religious organizations.

A separate bill from the minor *Rebuilding Korea Party* narrows its focus to allegations of bribery and illicit donations involving politicians. Meanwhile, a joint proposal by the opposition *People Power Party* and the *New Reform Party* goes further by including alleged cover-ups and interference in earlier investigations related to the [Family Federation](#).

Rather than consolidating these proposals or waiting for existing investigations to run their course, the ruling party has moved aggressively to push additional special counsel bills forward. On 8th January, the *Democratic Party* placed two major bills – one comprehensive special counsel bill and another specifically targeting the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji [See editor's note below] – on the agenda of the *National Assembly's Legislation and Judiciary Committee*. These bills were immediately referred to the committee's mediation panel, a procedural step that is usually reserved for contentious legislation.

[The Korea Herald](#) points out that under South Korea's parliamentary rules, a mediation or agenda coordination committee can deliberate on disputed bills for up to 90 days. However, if four of its six members vote in favor, a bill can be fast-tracked and sent directly to a plenary vote. Because the ruling party holds a numerical advantage in the Assembly, critics argue that this mechanism allows it to push through controversial legislation without meaningful bipartisan agreement.



Jung Chung-rae's
Portrait (2025). Photo: 월리민주 [더불어민주당] / Wikimedia Commons.
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Tensions escalated further when Democratic Party chair Rep. Jung Chung-rae (정청래) publicly suggested the possibility of yet another special counsel investigation – effectively a "third" comprehensive probe – before the second one had even begun. Speaking on a YouTube program on 6th January, Jung argued that if the second investigation proved insufficient, a follow-up "wrap-up" special counsel might be necessary. His remarks reinforced opposition claims that the ruling party is less interested in impartial fact-finding than in maintaining continuous political pressure through successive investigations.

Legal scholars have expressed alarm at this trend. Hwang Do-ssu (황도수), a law professor at Konkuk University, pointed out a fundamental contradiction in the ruling party's position. Special counsels, he explained, are appointed precisely because the public does not trust existing investigative authorities, particularly prosecutors. Yet the *Democratic Party* has long claimed that it has successfully reformed the prosecution by stripping it of excessive investigative powers and increasing its independence. If those reforms were effective, Hwang argues, then there should be no need for repeated special counsel investigations.

According to Hwang, this contradiction raises the troubling possibility that special counsels are being used not to compensate for institutional failure, but to engineer investigations that align with political objectives. In his view, such an approach risks turning the justice system into an instrument of populism, where legal processes are shaped by political narratives rather than evidence and due process.

Political commentator Choi Jin (崔澐), head of the *Institute of Presidential Leadership* in Seoul, echoed these concerns, describing the situation as a symptom of widespread public distrust in South Korea's core institutions. He noted that skepticism now extends beyond prosecutors to include the judiciary and the police, creating an environment in which extraordinary measures appear increasingly justified to the public – even when they may undermine institutional stability.

As the National Assembly prepares for a plenary session scheduled for 15th January, the confrontation shows no signs of easing. The ruling party is expected to push forward with the special counsel bills regardless of opposition resistance. In response, the *People Power Party* has threatened to launch a full-scale filibuster to delay or block passage. Despite these efforts, most observers believe the bills will ultimately pass, given the ruling bloc's numerical advantage.

Perhaps the most significant concern raised by experts is that the original purpose of the special counsel system is being reversed. Traditionally, special counsels were demanded by opposition parties seeking to investigate



Aggressively promoting special counsel

criticism of opposition parties according to investigations those in power, based on the belief that ordinary prosecutors could not act independently. Now, in a striking inversion, it is the ruling party itself that is aggressively promoting special counsel investigations.

This shift, critics warn, could set a dangerous precedent. If special counsels become a standard governing tool rather than an exceptional safeguard, South Korea risks normalizing a cycle of perpetual investigations driven by political rivalry. For Western observers, the situation offers a cautionary example of how legal mechanisms designed to protect democracy can, if overused or politicized, contribute to deeper institutional mistrust and prolonged political conflict rather than accountability and reform.

SPECIAL COUNSEL
investigations: **Lee Jae-myung**, President of South Korea since 4th June 2025. Photo: Jeonnam Provincial Government / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: South Korea's justice system facing a crisis: Illustration: ChatGPT, January 2026.

[**Editor's note:** *Shincheonji*, officially known as *Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony*, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation. *Shincheonji* teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it.]

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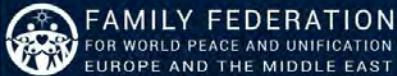
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