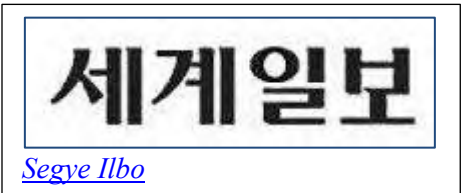


FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: S Korea's Persecution of Holy Mother Han Likened to the Conviction of Jesus

Knut Holdhus
July 11, 2026



Comparable fates: Jesus of Nazareth and Mother Han. Illustration: ChatGPT



[Segye Ilbo](#)

South Korean editorial claims prosecution's case uses unusually expansive interpretations of legal concepts and is influenced by social prejudice against a minority religion

The conservative Korean newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#) published on 10th July 2026, an [editorial](#) on the court case against [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), the leader of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea, also known as Unificationism (통일교).



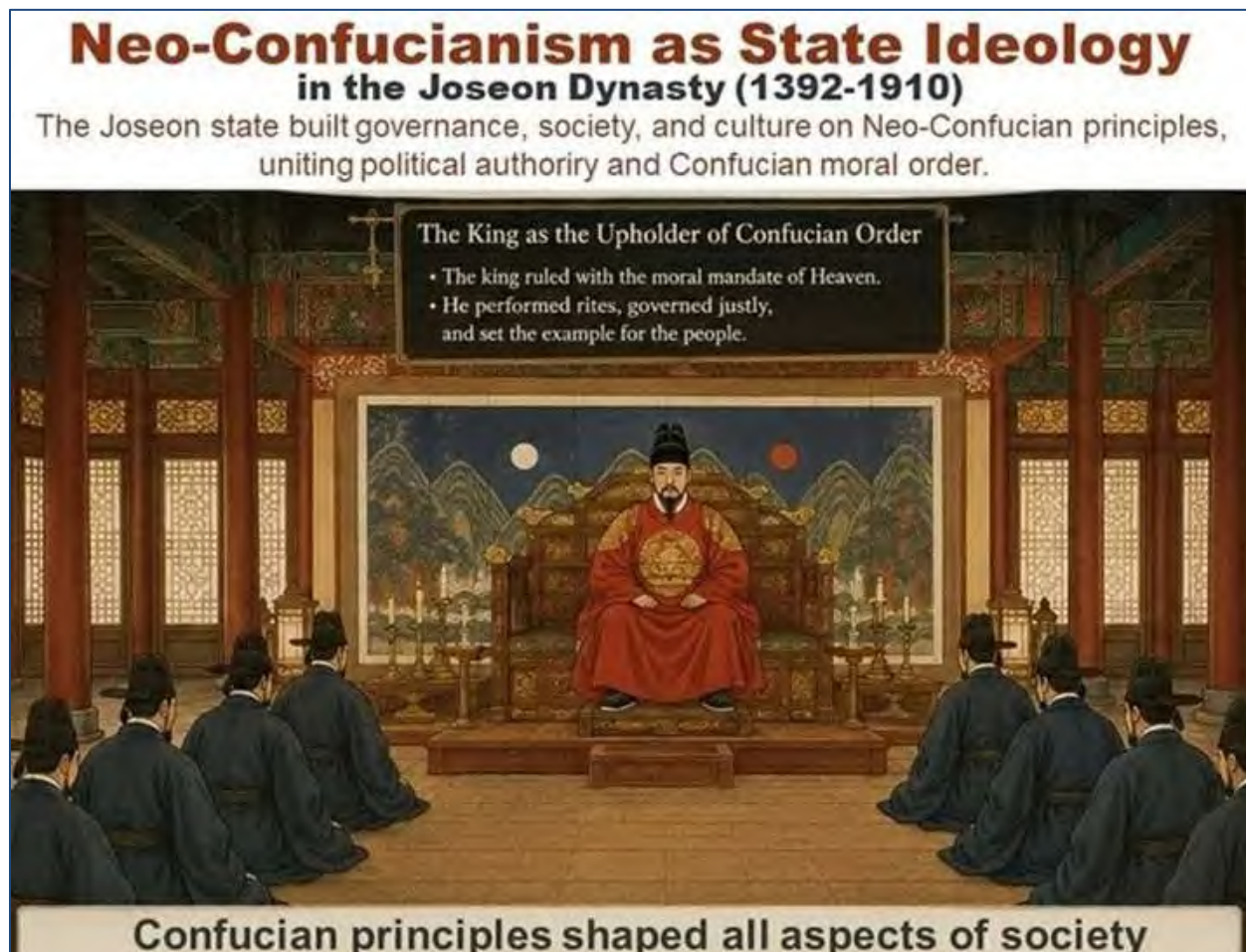
He was given life sentence, she 4 years in what some perceive as revenge on political opponents: Former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and First Lady Kim Keon-hee, here in Tokyo March 16, 2023

The [paper](#) argues that the outcome should be decided solely on the basis of evidence and legal reasoning rather than public prejudice toward a minority religion. The [editorial](#) is clearly an opinion piece critical of the special prosecutors [asking for a veritable "death sentence"](#) for the octogenarian religious leader - [13 years behind bars](#). [Hak Ja Han](#) - also called [Mother Han](#) - turned 83 last February and has been kept in detention since September last year. During her stay in a tiny cell, her health has [significantly deteriorated](#).

To understand the [article](#), it is helpful to look at several Korean political and legal concepts that may not be familiar to international readers.

The immediate context is that special prosecutors investigating corruption allegations involving Kim Keon-hee (김건희), the wife of former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (윤석열), requested a 13-year prison sentence for [Mother Han](#). According to the prosecution, she was involved in unlawful political funding and sought to influence the presidential office through intermediaries regarding matters affecting the [Family Federation](#). [Mother Han](#) has denied all allegations.

The [editorial](#) criticizes the prosecution's case, arguing that it reflects longstanding prejudice against what Koreans call a "minority religion" (sosu jonggyo, 소수 종교). In Korea, this expression does not simply mean a religion with relatively few members. It also carries the implication that such groups are often viewed with suspicion and are sometimes labeled as saibi (사이비), a word often translated as "cult", "pseudo-religion", or "heretical sect". Although saibi is commonly used in everyday Korean, it is not a legal classification but a socially loaded and frequently pejorative term. The editorial argues that such attitudes have unfairly influenced both public opinion and the prosecution.



The clearest historical example of unity of political authority and religious or ideological authority - jeonggyo ilchi - 정교일치 (政教一致) - in Korea is the Joseon dynasty (1392 - 1910), though with an important qualification: the "religion" was Neo-Confucianism, which is often described as both a philosophy and a state ideology rather than a religion in the Western sense. Illustration: ChatGPT

One of the prosecution's most striking allegations is that [Mother Han](#) sought to achieve jeonggyo ilchi (정교일치), literally "the unity of politics and religion". This phrase requires particular explanation because it has a much stronger meaning in Korean than the English expression "close church-state relations".

Historically, jeonggyo ilchi refers to a political system in which religious authority and state authority are effectively united. The classic example is a theocracy, where religious leaders exercise supreme political power or where the state is constitutionally organized around a particular religion. The editorial cites Iran as an example because its Constitution establishes an Islamic political system headed by a Supreme Leader chosen from among senior Shi'a clerics.

The [editorial](#) argues that applying this concept to the [Family Federation](#) is implausible. Since the [movement](#) represents only a small percentage of South Korea's population, the authors contend that it could not realistically aspire to establish a theocratic state. They further note that creating such a system would require constitutional amendments, making the accusation appear exaggerated. In the [editorial's](#) view, the prosecution has stretched the concept of jeonggyo ilchi beyond its ordinary meaning in order to make the charges appear more serious.

Another issue concerns the allegation that [Mother Han](#) sought political favors from associates of Kim Keon-hee(김건희). According to the editorial, the prosecution characterizes ordinary expressions of goodwill - such as asking public officials to "please support us" or "help us" - as illegal lobbying. The authors argue that these expressions are common forms of polite speech in Korean and do not necessarily imply an improper request for official action. They therefore suggest that the prosecution has adopted an overly broad interpretation of Korea's anti-corruption laws.

The [Segye Ilbo editorial](#) also disputes allegations that [Mother Han](#) personally embezzled [Family Federation](#) funds. Here, the discussion turns to the organizational structure of religious corporations in Korea. [Mother Han](#) is described as the [movement](#)'s "spiritual leader" rather than its financial administrator. According to the defense presented in court, administrative and financial decisions are handled by professional officials within the [organization](#)'s world headquarters, while [Mother Han](#) provides religious guidance and overall vision.

The [editorial](#) argues that this division of responsibilities resembles the governance of many other religious organizations and that prosecutors have incorrectly treated the [Family Federation](#) as though it were an ordinary commercial corporation with direct executive control vested in its president.



A constitution that guarantees freedom of religion: The Constitution of the Republic of Korea. Here, the first version enacted in 1948

Throughout the [editorial](#) runs a broader constitutional argument. The authors emphasize that freedom of religion is one of the fundamental rights guaranteed by South Korea's Constitution, alongside freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and privacy. They argue that constitutional equality before the law applies equally to both large and small religious communities. In their view, a religious organization should not face harsher treatment simply because it has relatively few adherents or because it is socially unpopular.

The [editorial](#) concludes by connecting [Mother Han](#)'s case with a broader political debate taking place in South Korea. It refers to a proposed amendment to the Civil Act that critics have nicknamed the "Religious Corporation Dissolution Act". The proposal would allow the government to revoke the legal status of religious corporations that violate the constitutional principle of separation between religion and the state by improperly intervening in politics.

Supporters argue that the measure would strengthen accountability and preserve political neutrality among religious organizations. The [editorial](#), however, interprets the proposal very differently. It argues that the legislation could discourage religious leaders from speaking publicly on political or social issues, effectively silencing religious voices in public life. For that reason, the authors describe it rhetorically as an "anti-free speech law for religious organizations", suggesting that it would have a chilling effect on constitutionally protected religious freedom.

Taken together, the [editorial](#) presents a consistent argument: that [Hak Ja Han](#)'s prosecution reflects broader social prejudice against minority religions, that prosecutors have employed unusually expansive interpretations of legal concepts such as "unity of politics and religion" and political solicitation, and that courts should disregard public opinion and decide the case solely on the basis of evidence and established legal principles.

FATES OF SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENTS	
Syngman Rhee (in office 1948-1960)	– Exile in Hawaii until death
Yun Bo-seon (1960-1962)	– Convicted of treason
Park Chung-hee (1963-1979)	– Assassinated
Choi Kyu-hah (1979-1980)	– Forced out by coup
Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988)	– Death sentence, pardoned
Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993)	– Jailed, pardoned
Kim Young-sam (1993-1998)	– Son jailed
Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003)	– Aides investigated
Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008)	– Suicide during probe
Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013)	– Jailed, pardoned
Park Geun-hye (2013-2017)	– Impeached, jailed, pardoned
Moon Jae-in (2017-2022)	– Aides probed
Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2025)	– Life imprisonment

Now, also religious organizations having supported former presidents are in danger: South Korea has a long, almost uncanny pattern of post-presidency trouble - enough that some Koreans joke there's a "curse" on the Blue House. Each new administration often tries to "clean house" by prosecuting the previous one. The presidency in South Korea has immense influence, making both abuse and backlash more likely. This has created a cycle: leaders push legal or moral boundaries while in office, then political opponents pursue them once they step down

Whether or not one agrees with these conclusions, understanding the [article](#) requires appreciating the distinctive meanings that Korean legal and political terminology carries, as well as the country's longstanding persecution of new religious movements and tendency once governing power changes hands, to harshly punish political opponents and anyone supporting them.

See also [South Korea's Slide Toward Authoritarianism](#)

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South
Korean
daily
Chosun
Ilbo



The logo of the Chosun Ilbo

reported in an [article](#) by Kim Na-yeong (김나영) on 10th July about the final hearing in the case against [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), the longtime leader of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), commonly known in Korea as [Unificationism](#) (통일교). Special prosecutors have requested a 13-year prison sentence for the 83-year-old religious leader, whom many call [Mother Han](#). The case is one of the most significant legal proceedings to emerge from the investigation into the relationship between [Unificationism](#) and the administration of former conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열).

See also [Editorial Challenges Prosecution of Mother Han](#)

Commenting on the expected deliberately harsh stance of the special prosecutors, in a [statement](#) on 9th July the [Family Federation](#) leadership of North America and Europe claims,

“After months of detention and interrogation, the government’s case rests on innuendo, association, and a maze of technical accusations that obscure more than they prove.”



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

At the center of the prosecution’s case is the allegation that senior figures within the [religious organization](#) cultivated improper political influence by providing money, luxury gifts, and financial support to prominent conservative politicians and public officials. According to the [Chosun Ilbo article](#), special prosecutors led by Min Joong-gi (민중기) argue that these activities amounted to an illegal intertwining of religion and politics that undermined South Korea’s

constitutional system.

The sentencing request was made on 10th July 2026, during the final hearing before the *Seoul Central District Court*. A request for a particular sentence, however, does not mean that the defendant has been convicted. Under South Korean criminal procedure, prosecutors present their recommended punishment before the court delivers its verdict at a later date.

According to the special prosecution team, [Mother Han](#) was not merely aware of the alleged activities but served as the ultimate decision-maker within the [religious organization](#) and was the primary beneficiary of its political lobbying efforts. Prosecutors therefore asked the court to impose a total sentence of 13 years in prison. They proposed five years for alleged violations of the *Political Funds Act* and an additional eight years for the remaining charges.

The [Chosun Ilbo](#) writes that the case also involves several former senior officials of [Unificationism](#). Prosecutors requested a 10-year prison sentence for former chief of staff [Jeong Won-ju](#) (정원주), describing her as [Mother Han](#)’s closest aide who played a central role in implementing major decisions. They further alleged that [Jeong](#) helped establish off the books funds



Jeong Won-ju, here 19th January 2025. Screenshot from [FFWPU](#) video.



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established on the books funds that were ultimately intended for **Mother Han**.

Former World Headquarters Director **Yoon Yeong-ho** (윤영호) faces a requested sentence of three years and six months. Although prosecutors argued that **Yoon** committed crimes in order to expand his own influence within the **religious organization**, they also acknowledged that many of his actions were allegedly carried out under **Mother Han's** direction. **Yoon's** wife, a former finance director within the **Family Federation** identified only by her surname Lee, faces a requested sentence of three years on charges related to embezzlement. Prosecutors stated that while she exercised considerable control over the finances of the **religious organization**, they took into account her cooperative attitude during the investigation and the fact that she acted under instructions from senior officials.

The prosecution described the case in unusually strong language. It argued that the affair was not simply a matter of campaign finance violations but represented an attempt by a **religious organization** to insert itself into the highest levels of government decision-making. According to prosecutors, this conduct disrupted South Korea's constitutional order and amounted to an abuse of state power. They urged the court to impose severe punishments to deter similar conduct by religious organizations in the future.

The **Chosun Ilbo** report points out that the charges against **Hak Ja Han** cover several separate allegations.



Yoon Yeong-ho, former international HQ director of the **Family Federation**. Here, 6th Dec. 2020. Screenshot from Peacelink TV

One concerns an alleged payment of 100 million won (approximately US\$75,000 at the time) made in January 2022 to *People Power Party* lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동). Prosecutors allege that **Mother Han**, together with **Jeong** and **Yoon**, sought favorable treatment for **Unificationism** from the incoming Yoon administration and violated South Korea's Political Funds Act by providing the money.

A second allegation involves what Korean prosecutors describe as “split donations” (쪼개기 후원), a practice in which a large contribution is broken into many smaller donations made under different names or through multiple individuals in order to evade legal limits or disclosure requirements. Prosecutors claim that between March and April 2022, approximately 144 million won in funds connected to Unificationism was distributed in this manner to lawmakers belonging to the conservative *People Power Party* and other politicians.

Another major allegation concerns luxury gifts reportedly intended for First Lady Kim Keon Hee (김건희). Prosecutors allege that **Mother Han** instructed an intermediary, Jeon Seong-bae (전성배), to deliver a Graff diamond necklace and a Chanel handbag to Kim in July 2022. They contend that this violated South Korea's *Improper Solicitation and Graft Act*, which regulates gifts provided to public officials and their spouses.

Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) has also been indicted separately in another criminal case involving alleged bribery. However, in the present proceedings, he is being tried only on charges related to the political donations and associated offenses.

The trial forms part of a broader investigation launched by the current left-leaning Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration into allegations that **Unificationism** maintained unusually close ties with senior members of the

conservative Yoon administration. Since the assassination of former conservative Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022 – which drew international attention to the political connections of the [religious organization](#) in Japan – its activities and influence have come under increased scrutiny. In South Korea, based on those concerns, the Lee administration appointed special prosecutors to start criminal investigations focusing on whether [Unificationism](#) officials sought to influence government policy through unlawful political contributions, lobbying, and the provision of expensive gifts.

The court has not yet issued its verdict. The prosecution’s presentation represents only one side of the case, and the defendants remain presumed innocent until the court reaches a final judgment. Nevertheless, the prosecution’s request for a 13-year prison sentence against [Mother Han](#) underscores the seriousness with which investigators view the allegations and marks one of the most consequential legal cases involving [Unificationism](#) in South Korea’s history.

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Featured image above: [Hak Ja Han](#), aka. [Mother Han](#) in 2023. Photo: FFWPU, improved for higher resolution and sharpness by Grok xAI, 16th June 2026.

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