

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: New S Korean Law = Standards for Religious Reporting

Knut Holdhus
July 13, 2026



New standards for reporting on religion in South Korea. Illustration: ChatGPT

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025: [Segye Ilbo](#))

When allegations become headlines: New South Korean false information law raises questions about new standards for reporting and balancing press freedom and accuracy when writing about faith

On 8th July 2026, Jeong Seong-su (정성수), the religion correspondent for the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#), published an [opinion column](#) examining the implications of South Korea's newly enacted "False and Manipulated Information Eradication Act". Although the legislation has attracted widespread attention for its potential impact on political speech and the media, Jeong argues that one of its most significant - but less discussed - areas of influence may be the reporting of religious organizations.

His [article](#) is not primarily about the legal details of the new law. Rather, it is a reflection on the relationship between journalism, public opinion, and religious freedom in South Korea. Using the Family [Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea known as [Unificationism](#) (통일교) - as an example, Jeong contends that religious groups have often found themselves judged in the court of public opinion before allegations against them have been fully verified. While acknowledging that religious organizations should be subject to legitimate public scrutiny and investigative reporting, he argues that journalism

has an equally important responsibility to distinguish clearly between established facts and unverified suspicions.

The new legislation, which came into force on 7th July 2026, strengthens legal accountability for the dissemination of false or manipulated information. Since its passage, it has generated considerable debate

within South Korea. Supporters view it as an important tool for combating fake news and protecting individuals and organizations from reputational harm. Critics, however, worry that it could have a chilling effect on freedom of expression or make journalists reluctant to pursue legitimate investigative reporting. Jeong recognizes this broader controversy but focuses his discussion on what the law may mean for religious communities.



Under the new South Korean law, judicial courts ultimately determine falsity and award punitive damages. The Korea Media and Communications Commission (KMCC) enforces administrative fines and oversees platform compliance. However, day-to-day evaluation falls on private tech platforms, which must independently process user reports and moderate content using self-governance frameworks. Illustration: ChatGPT

According to the columnist, religion occupies a particularly vulnerable position within South Korean public discourse. Unlike political parties or commercial enterprises, religious organizations are often viewed through the lens of deeply rooted social stereotypes. Labels such as "cult", "corrupt organization", or "secretive religious group", he writes, can spread rapidly through media coverage and public discussion regardless of whether they are ultimately substantiated. Once such an image becomes established, it can be extremely difficult to reverse, even if subsequent investigations or court proceedings fail to confirm the original allegations.

Jeong argues that this reflects a broader structural problem in contemporary journalism. Modern news organizations operate under intense pressure to publish stories quickly, especially in the digital era. As a result, preliminary allegations made during criminal investigations or other official inquiries are sometimes reported in a manner that gives readers the impression they have already been proven true. If prosecutors later decline to bring charges or courts eventually reach a different conclusion, those developments rarely receive the same level of media attention as the initial accusations. Although corrections or follow-up reports may eventually appear, the first impression created in the public mind often persists.

The columnist emphasizes that this imbalance can impose lasting harm on individuals and organizations alike. Even when legal proceedings ultimately vindicate those who were accused, the reputational damage may already be irreversible. He therefore views the new law as encouraging greater journalistic diligence by reinforcing the importance of careful fact-checking before publication.

As an illustration of these concerns, Jeong refers to the extensive media attention surrounding the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) during recent years. Following political and social controversies involving the [religious organization](#), numerous news reports examined its alleged relationships with political figures, financial matters, and various criminal investigations. These reports generated widespread public attention and contributed significantly to public perceptions of the [movement](#).

Jeong notes in his [article](#) that the [Family Federation](#) has consistently disputed many of these reports, maintaining that substantial portions were inaccurate or misleading. Regardless of whether particular allegations ultimately prove to be true or false, he argues that the [religious community](#) and its members have already borne the consequences of the negative public image created by the reporting. This, in his view, illustrates why stronger standards for factual verification are necessary.



At the same time, the author explicitly cautions against interpreting the new law as retroactively determining the truth or falsity of previous reporting. He stresses that each individual case must still be assessed independently through established judicial procedures. The mere fact that certain allegations were not included in a criminal indictment or did not result in prosecution does not automatically render earlier reporting false. Questions concerning the accuracy of particular reports remain matters for the courts to determine on a case-by-case basis.

For Jeong, however, the principal significance of the legislation lies elsewhere. He argues that its most important message is symbolic rather than punitive. In his reading, the law represents a societal commitment to placing greater emphasis on the responsibility to verify facts before disseminating potentially damaging information. Rather than simply increasing legal penalties, it signals that factual accuracy should receive greater weight throughout the reporting process.

If that objective is achieved, Jeong believes several practical changes may follow. Journalists may become more cautious

about using definitive language before allegations have been independently confirmed. Greater attention may be devoted to evaluating the credibility of sources and corroborating claims with objective evidence. News organizations may also become more attentive to presenting responses from those who are the subject of allegations and to conducting more thorough cross-checking before publication.

Importantly, the columnist argues that these principles should apply equally to all religious traditions rather than benefiting any single organization. Whether the subject is Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, the [Family Federation](#), or a smaller religious movement, every religious community, he writes, deserves to be evaluated on the basis of verified facts rather than rumor or social prejudice. Public criticism remains entirely appropriate where misconduct is supported by evidence, but criticism founded on speculation or unverified accusations should not be confused with responsible journalism.

Jeong concludes by placing this discussion within the broader framework of religious liberty. Freedom of religion, he argues, encompasses more than the right to worship or organize religious activities. It also includes protection against having a religious community's reputation unfairly damaged through false statements or manipulated information. In his view, safeguarding communities against demonstrably false claims complements rather than contradicts democratic values such as freedom of expression.

At the same time, the columnist acknowledges that the new law will not eliminate every difficulty surrounding media reporting or public debate. Freedom of the press and reporting in the public interest remain essential principles that should continue to be protected. Nevertheless, he argues that the legislation conveys an important reminder: regardless of whether the subject is a politician, a business, a religious organization, or an ordinary citizen, no one should be publicly condemned solely on the basis of allegations that have not been established as fact. By encouraging more rigorous verification before publication, Jeong suggests, the law may ultimately contribute to a fairer and more responsible media environment.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Mother Han: The Dangers Of Guilt By Position

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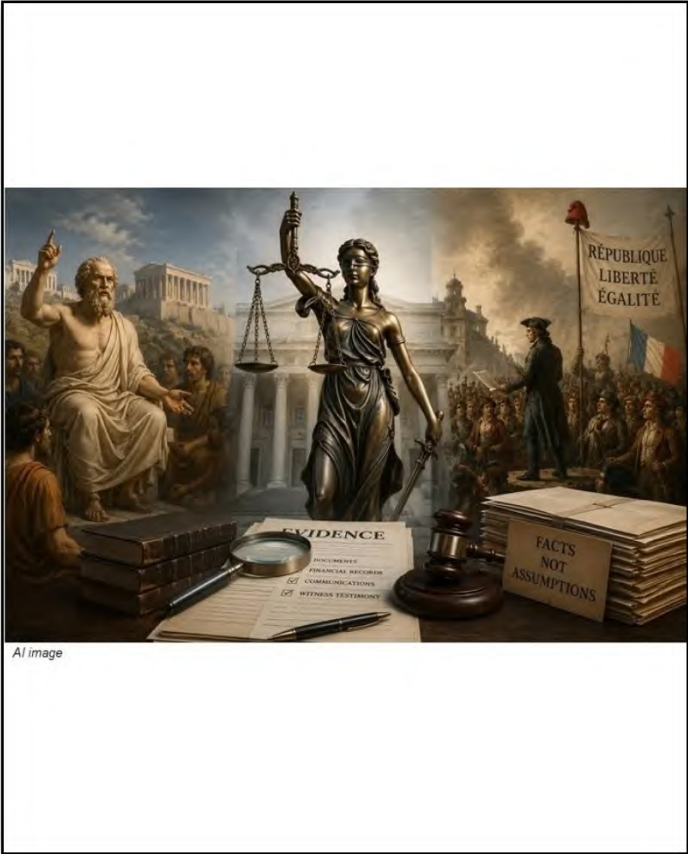












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Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): Segye Ilbo

opinion column published by the South

Korean daily Segye Ilbo on 12th July 2026, religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) argues that criminal justice must remain firmly anchored in demonstrable evidence rather than assumptions arising from a person's position, prominence, or public influence. Writing in response to the special prosecutor's recommendation

that Family Federation President Hak Ja Han (한학자) receive a thirteen-year prison sentence, Jeong presents the case as an opportunity to reflect on broader principles of criminal law and the historical dangers that arise when legal systems become influenced by symbolism or political narratives instead of concrete proof.

See also Mother Han: Beyond One Trial – the Wider Stakes

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The column begins by observing that the recommended sentence is unusually severe by South Korean standards and has had a profound emotional impact not only on Hak Ja Han – also called Mother Han – herself but also on members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification around the world.

Jeong notes that the



Sun Myung Moon praying in a concentration camp in Heungnam, North Korea in 1948 while fellow prisoners were sleeping. Illustration: FFWPU

movement's co-founder, Sun Myung Moon (문선명), likewise experienced imprisonment under the communist regime in North Korea decades earlier. Although Jeong emphasizes that the historical circumstances are entirely different, he argues that democratic legal systems distinguish themselves precisely by ensuring that controversial public or religious figures receive judgments based solely on evidence and legal reasoning rather than prejudice or public sentiment.

A central point of the article concerns the distinction between a prosecutor's sentencing recommendation and a judicial verdict. Under South Korea's legal system, prosecutors merely present their interpretation of the evidence and recommend an appropriate sentence if guilt is established. The court independently evaluates both the prosecution's arguments and the defense's responses before determining whether the charges have been proven beyond the applicable legal standard and, if so, what sentence is appropriate. Jeong therefore cautions readers against treating the prosecution's request as though it were already a judicial finding.

The author further questions whether the prosecution has publicly demonstrated sufficient direct evidence to justify such a lengthy recommended sentence. According to the column, investigators spent roughly two years conducting an extensive investigation involving searches, financial inquiries, communications analysis, and numerous witness interviews. Yet Jeong argues that, based on what became



The logo of the Segye Ilbo



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public during the closing arguments, it remains unclear what specific evidence directly establishes that **Mother Han** personally instructed, coordinated, or knowingly participated in the alleged criminal acts involving political funding or gifts.

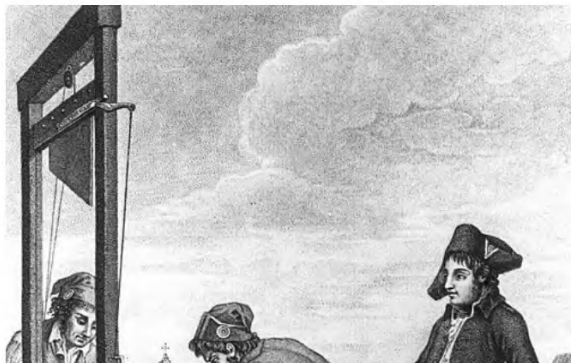
From this perspective, the **article** criticizes what it characterizes as an approach based primarily on organizational hierarchy rather than individual conduct. Jeong contends that modern criminal law is founded upon the principle that individuals are punished for actions they personally commit, authorize, or knowingly participate in – not simply because they occupy positions of authority. While leaders may under certain legal circumstances bear responsibility for the acts of subordinates, criminal liability generally requires proof connecting the accused to the alleged conduct. The **column** warns against allowing broad concepts such as “ultimate beneficiary” or “final decision-maker” to substitute for evidence demonstrating actual criminal involvement.



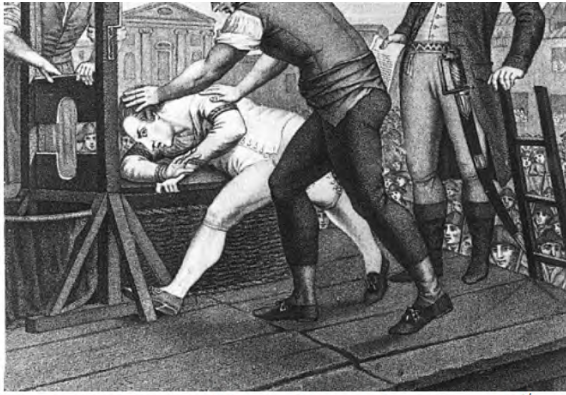
*The Death of Socrates, extract from painting by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825. Photo: Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931. **Public domain** image. Cropped*

To illustrate this concern, Jeong turns to one of the most famous judicial proceedings in Western history: the trial of Socrates in Athens in 399 BCE. Socrates, the philosopher whose teachings profoundly shaped Western philosophy through his students, including Plato, was formally charged with impiety and with corrupting the city’s youth. Although the historical record – preserved primarily through Plato’s *Apology* – remains subject to scholarly interpretation, many historians regard the prosecution as reflecting broader political and cultural anxieties in Athens following the Peloponnesian War rather than solely the legal accusations themselves.

Athens had recently experienced military defeat, political instability, and periods of oligarchic rule involving several individuals who had once associated with Socrates. In that atmosphere, his habit of publicly questioning conventional wisdom and exposing weaknesses in accepted beliefs may have appeared threatening to many citizens. His accuser, Meletus, argued that Socrates undermined traditional religion and exerted a harmful influence upon young Athenians. Socrates defended himself vigorously but ultimately refused to abandon his philosophical mission or seek exile, and he was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock. Over subsequent centuries, his trial has frequently been interpreted as a cautionary example of how legal institutions may sometimes punish an individual’s perceived influence or symbolic significance rather than demonstrable unlawful conduct.



Jeong
also
invokes



The beheading of Maximillien Robespierre 28th July 1794, signifying the end of the Reign of Terror. Engraving by Giacomo Aliprandi (1775-1855). Photo: Unknown author / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image.

another historical example: *the Law of Suspects* enacted during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror in 1793. Following the overthrow of the monarchy, revolutionary France faced foreign invasion, internal rebellion, and intense political conflict. Under these circumstances, revolutionary leaders adopted increasingly severe measures intended to protect the Republic. The *Law of Suspects* greatly expanded the categories of people who could be arrested, including those whose conduct, relationships, social background, or political attitudes merely aroused suspicion of insufficient loyalty to the Revolution.

Rather than requiring conventional standards of criminal proof, authorities often relied upon perceived intentions, reputation, or association. Combined with the operation of Revolutionary Tribunals, the law contributed to thousands of executions before the Terror eventually ended with the fall of Maximilien Robespierre in 1794. Historians frequently cite the episode as illustrating how fear, ideology, and emergency powers can weaken procedural safeguards within the justice system.

Drawing upon these historical parallels, Jeong argues that legal systems must resist allowing abstract political concepts or moral judgments to replace careful proof of individual criminal acts. His point is not that historical events are identical, but that history repeatedly demonstrates the importance of maintaining the distinction between suspicion and evidence, status and conduct, symbolism and legally provable facts.

The [column](#) concludes by acknowledging that [Mother Han](#) remains a controversial figure whose legacy will continue to be viewed very differently by supporters and critics alike. Regardless of those differing assessments, Jeong argues that courts should base their decisions exclusively on evidence presented according to established legal principles. He notes [Mother Han's](#) closing statement to the court, in which she maintained that she had devoted her life to promoting peace and the ideal of one human family, denied seeking political power through money, expressed regret that trusted associates had contributed to the present circumstances, and reaffirmed her intention to continue working for peace.

Ultimately, [Jeong's essay](#) is less an attempt to determine Hak Ja Han's guilt or innocence than a broader reflection on the philosophy of criminal justice. By invoking both the trial of Socrates and the Law of Suspects during the French Revolution, he argues that democratic legal systems best preserve their legitimacy when they judge individuals according to proven actions rather than reputation, prominence, or symbolic significance. Or as Jeong puts it,

“Throughout the history of law, whenever suspicion has been allowed to outweigh proof, the result has invariably been one of justice's darkest chapters.”

See also [Mother Han: Beyond One Trial – the Wider Stakes](#)

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Lady Justice with Socrates and a scene from the French Revolution. Illustration: ChatGPT, 13th July 2026.

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