

Knut Holdhus
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The DPK leadership race 2026. Illustration



Victim of religious finger-pointing in South Korean governing party leadership race: Shincheonji Church of Jesus

Victim of religious finger-pointing in governing party leadership race: [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)

Persecuted religious movements become political weapons in heated leadership race of governing Democratic Party of Korea (DPK)

As South Korea's governing Democratic Party prepares to elect a new party leader at its national convention on 17th August, the leadership race has become increasingly bitter. What began as a contest over political direction has now evolved into an exchange of accusations involving two of the country's best-known new religious movements: Shincheonji [See editor's note below] and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea generally known as [Unificationism](#) (통일교).

The controversy reflects a familiar pattern in South Korean politics. Persecuted religious organizations are often invoked during election campaigns, not necessarily because of proven institutional involvement, but because allegations of religious connections can become effective political weapons. In the current contest, supporters of each candidate are accusing the opposing side of benefiting from such religious ties.

At the center of the dispute is a probe into allegations that members of Shincheonji [See editor's note below], a rapidly growing Christian new religious movement, collectively joined the Democratic Party during the 3rd June local elections. Investigators from a joint police-prosecution task force are said to have uncovered evidence suggesting that Shincheonji [See editor's note below] encouraged members in the Seoul metropolitan area to register as Democratic Party members.

If confirmed, such coordinated party enrollment could raise questions about attempts to influence internal party elections rather than general national elections. The reported findings appear to lend support to claims made by former Prime Minister Kim Min-seok (김민석), one of the candidates competing for the

party leadership.



According to a [report](#) by JoongAng reporter Oh So-yeong, published on 24th July, developments in an ongoing investigation classified as criminal have intensified these political attacks.



Kim Min-seok, Prime Minister of South Korea from July 2025 to June 2026



Portrait of Jeong Cheong-rae (Jung Chung-rae) in June 2026

The [JoongAng Ilbo article](#) mentions that earlier in July, Kim publicly vowed to uncover what he described as Shincheonji's interference in Democratic Party politics. He argued that the leadership contest had become entangled in an alliance involving anti-Lee Jae-myung (이재명) forces, factional divisions within the party, and Shincheonji [See editor's note below]. His remarks immediately became one of the most controversial issues of the campaign.

Initially, Democratic Party officials attempted to dismiss the allegations. Party spokesperson Kang Jun-hyeon (강준현) stated that a review of party membership records conducted last December had not produced meaningful evidence linking members' addresses to any particular religious organization. However, reports that investigators had now identified possible evidence of organized recruitment weakened that earlier reassurance.

The investigation has placed supporters of Kim's principal rival, former Democratic Party leader Jeong Cheong-rae (정청래), under growing political pressure. Although there has been no public evidence directly connecting Jeong himself to the alleged activities, members of his political camp have responded forcefully.

Lawmakers aligned with Jeong accused Kim of making irresponsible claims without sufficient evidence. During a press conference, they argued that if Kim could not substantiate his allegations, he should withdraw from the leadership race. They also criticized him for encouraging investigations that, in their view, benefited the conservative opposition People's Power Party.

Kim's supporters quickly responded. Representative Chae Hyun-il (채현일), a close political ally, accused Jeong's camp of damaging party unity by acting primarily as defenders of their preferred candidate rather than seeking the truth about the allegations.

Meanwhile, Jeong attempted to strike a more cautious tone. Through social media, he called for a thorough investigation regardless of who might be involved and urged authorities to disclose the results as soon as possible. Nevertheless, some lawmakers close to Jeong privately acknowledged that they would have to wait and see what evidence investigators ultimately release.

Others expressed frustration over what they viewed as selective leaks from the investigation. Representative Choi Min-hee (최민희) questioned who was providing confidential investigative information to the media and urged investigators to complete their work promptly rather than allowing speculation based on vague references to "circumstantial evidence."

As accusations involving Shincheonji [See editor's note below] dominated the political debate, supporters of Jeong launched a counterattack directed at Kim himself. Instead of focusing on Shincheonji [See editor's note below], they raised questions about Kim's past contacts with the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#).

Posts circulating within online communities sympathetic to Jeong pointed out that Kim had attended a Peace Road health walking event in June 2024. Peace Road is an organization that promotes the proposed [Korea - Japan undersea tunnel project](#) and has long been associated with organizations connected to the [Family Federation](#). The posts also noted that Kim's son had graduated from a high school operated by a foundation affiliated with [Unificationism](#).

These facts were presented by Kim's critics as evidence of inconsistency. They argued that while Kim was portraying Shincheonji [See editor's note below] as a political threat, he himself had participated in an event linked to [another religious movement](#) that has frequently been the subject of controversy in South Korea and Japan.

One online post summarized this criticism by asking why Kim was declaring an all-out struggle against Shincheonji [See editor's note below] while having personally attended a [Family Federation](#)-related event, and questioned whether he was turning the party convention into a "muddy battlefield" of mutual accusations.

The [article](#) does not suggest that attendance at the Peace Road event or having a family member educated at a school operated by a [Family Federation](#)-affiliated foundation demonstrates any improper relationship with the [religious movement](#). Rather, it illustrates how such associations are being employed as political ammunition during an increasingly acrimonious leadership contest.

The [JoongAng Ilbo report](#) portrays a Democratic Party convention in which substantive policy debates risk being overshadowed by investigations, factional rivalries, and competing attempts to portray political opponents as linked to persecuted religious organizations. Whether the ongoing investigation ultimately substantiates the allegations concerning Shincheonji [See editor's note below] remains to be seen, but the controversy has already transformed the party leadership race into one in which religion has become a central - and highly contentious - political issue.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[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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Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo: [Segye Ilbo](#)

Religious Legacy by the Lives It Shaped: The story of Choi Won-bok applying ideals from Unificationism to education

Continued from part 1: [Scholar's Journey: She Gave Up Academia for Faith](#)

Yet,



Maria Park (박마리아 – 1906-1960), vice-president of Ehwa (Ewha) Women's University 1954-1960, including during the well-known 1954–1955 Ewha incident when faculty members such as Choi Won-bok and Kim Young-oon, along with several students, were dismissed or expelled over their association with the newly founded [Unification Church](#). Photo: [FFWPU](#)



Helen Kim (김활란), president of Ehwa (Ewha) Women's University 1939-1961, including during the well-known 1954–1955 Ewha incident when faculty members such as Choi Won-bok and Kim Young-oon, along with several students, were dismissed or expelled over their association with the newly founded [Unification Church](#). Photo (1951): Abbie Rowe (1905-1967). [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) argues in his [article](#) 24th July in the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) that an equally important fact is often overlooked: while she left the university, she did not leave education.

Instead, Choi Won-bok (최원복 – 1916–2006) devoted her educational abilities to new settings.

Within the [Family Federation](#) she became deeply involved in member education, teaching the movement's theology, known as the [Unification Principles](#).



The revised second edition of [Divine Principle](#) published in 1973 that became the standard English version of the original Korean Wolli Kangron. After [Sun Myung Moon](#) and [Hak Ja Han](#) moved to USA in December 1971,

Because she spoke fluent English and Japanese, she also worked extensively in international education and missionary activities, helping translate the [Unification Principles](#) into English and contributing to communication between the [movement's](#) members around the world.

According to Jeong, these efforts helped lay part of the educational foundation for the [movement's](#) expanding international activities.

Her most visible contribution, however, came after she became principal of [Sunhwa Arts Middle and High School](#), where she served for more than nine years between 1977 and 1987.

Jeong considers this stage of her life



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he commissioned Choi Won-bok to translate the Korean text into English. She did so during a 40-day period in 1972, and her text was edited by several American members before the first edition was published in early Summer of 1973 and the second edition later that year.

especially significant. Rather than remaining in the more prestigious world of university education, she chose to devote herself to the education of adolescents. In his view, this demonstrates that she regarded education not merely as a profession but as a lifelong mission.

Many students who later achieved international recognition studied at Sunhwa during her leadership. While educational success can rarely be measured immediately, Jeong argues that the later accomplishments of these students testify to the lasting influence of the school's educational environment during those years.

Equally important, he writes, was the philosophy that guided Choi's work.

She believed schools should be places where character is formed as much as knowledge is acquired. Academic excellence was important, but it was not enough. Education, she argued, should produce people capable of maintaining integrity during hardship while also showing generosity toward others.

She often encouraged students to preserve their humanity in an increasingly technological world. Scientific and technological progress, she believed, should never come at the expense of imagination, poetry, or compassion. A truly educated person should combine professional competence with emotional depth and moral responsibility.



Sunhwa Arts Middle and High School in Seoul, South Korea.
Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Her understanding of art reflected the same philosophy. Art, she said, finds its highest purpose not simply through technical brilliance or public performance but through its ability to comfort people who are suffering and bring warmth into difficult lives.

Reading also occupied an important place in her educational vision. She described books as allowing a person, even in the humblest surroundings, to learn from hundreds of great teachers. Lifelong reading, she believed, was essential for continual personal growth.

One of the concepts Jeong highlights is Choi's distinction between the **"small self"** and the **"greater self"**. Human beings, she taught, should not live only for personal success or private interests. By recognizing both their relationship with [God](#) and their responsibility toward humanity, individuals discover a larger purpose that transcends self-interest. Education should therefore cultivate not only capable professionals but also responsible citizens who contribute to society as a whole.

Jeong concludes that institutions are ultimately judged by the people they produce. Buildings may disappear and organizations may experience periods of crisis, but the lives of individuals endure as lasting evidence of the values they embraced.

He notes that the [Family Federation](#) is currently passing through one of the most difficult periods in its history. In such circumstances, he argues, it is worth looking beyond contemporary controversies to examine the lives of

individuals who dedicated themselves to education, public service, and the development of others.

In his view, Choi Won-bok represents one such individual. Although she sacrificed an established university career because of her religious convictions, she never abandoned her commitment to educating young people. Instead, she spent the remainder of her life helping others grow intellectually, morally, and spiritually.

For Jeong, that lifelong commitment makes Choi Won-bok more than an important educator. It makes her part of what he considers one of the enduring educational legacies that the [Family Federation](#) has left to Korean society. Whether readers ultimately agree with that assessment or not, he suggests that the life of Choi Won-bok deserves to be considered as part of any balanced evaluation of the [movement's](#) historical impact.

See part 1: [Scholar's Journey: She Gave Up Academia for Faith](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Choi Won-bok in 1975. Photo: [FFWPU](#). Lanczos upscaling by Grok xAI, July 2026.

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