

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: S Korea's Special Prosecutors, Political Tools?

Knut Holdhus
August 24, 2026



Justice caught between politics. Illustration: ChatGPT

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)



*Aggressively promoting special prosecutor investigations: **Lee Jae-myung**, President of South Korea since June 4, 2025. Here on October 29, 2025, at the Hilton Hotel in Gyeongju, South Korea*

Becoming a tool used by the governing party against its political opponents: A system of special prosecutors created to guarantee impartial investigations

A recent [editorial](#) in the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) has sharply criticized what it sees as the growing politicization of the country's **special prosecutor system** under President Lee Jae-myung (이재명). Published on 24th August 2026, the [editorial](#) argues that a mechanism originally created to guarantee impartial investigations in politically sensitive cases has increasingly become, in the newspaper's view, a tool that can be used by the governing party against its political opponents.

See also: [SKorean Court's Sharp Criticism of Prosecutors](#)

See also [When Special Prosecutors Become Political Tools](#)

The [editorial](#) was published immediately after the conclusion of the **180-day investigation by the so-called Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team**. This investigation was established to examine allegations left unresolved by three earlier special prosecutor investigations focusing on controversies surrounding the administration of former President Yoon Suk Yeol (윤석열). These included the 3rd December 2024 martial-law episode, allegations involving former First

Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), and the controversy surrounding the death of a Marine Corps conscript.

Rather than regarding the latest investigation as a successful completion of that process, [Segye Ilbo](#) portrays its outcome as evidence of a system that has become increasingly open-ended. The special prosecutor's team reportedly transferred **46 unresolved cases** to the police when its six-month mandate expired. [One of those unresolved cases](#) concerned alleged suppression of a police investigation involving the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - in Korea often referred to simply as [Unificationism](#) (통일교). That particular part of the investigation was principally into the handling of police intelligence and possible suppression/leakage of an investigation concerning [Family Federation](#)

leaders.



Protesters clashed with Korean soldiers 3rd December 3, 2024 when martial law was declared

The [Family Federation](#) case here provides a concrete example of the broader issue discussed by [Segye Ilbo](#): the **Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team investigated the matter for six months, but ultimately handed it to another investigative body without resolving it.** That is precisely the kind of institutional continuity and potentially open-ended investigation that the [editorial](#) is questioning.

Special Prosecutor Kweon Chang-yeong (권창영) defended the decision to transfer the matter to the National Police Agency's National Office of Investigation (국가수사본부) for further investigation by saying that some matters could not realistically be resolved within six months. He also suggested that investigations should continue through a permanent **Special Investigation Headquarters**.

For [Segye Ilbo](#), however, this raises a fundamental question: **If special prosecutor investigations can simply be followed by new special prosecutor investigations or permanent investigative bodies, where does the process end?** The [editorial](#) asks rhetorically whether South Korea is heading toward a situation in which special prosecutors continue operating throughout the entire term of current President Lee Jae-myung (이재명), which ends in June 2030.



President of South Korea Kim Dae-jung, Feb. 27, 2001

Why does South Korea have special prosecutors?

To understand the [newspaper's](#) criticism, some background about South Korea's special prosecutor system is necessary. The system was introduced in **1999, during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung (김대중)**. Its purpose was to provide an alternative mechanism for investigating politically sensitive cases in situations where there could be doubts about the impartiality of the ordinary prosecution service. At the time, one case involved a sitting senior prosecutor, while another involved one of President Kim's close associates. Both the governing and opposition parties agreed that it could be difficult to expect the regular prosecution service to investigate such cases impartially.

A special prosecutor is therefore intended to operate at a certain distance from the ordinary political and prosecutorial establishment. In principle, the system is designed to provide **independence from political power and neutrality between**

competing political forces.

[Segye Ilbo](#) argues that this original rationale has gradually been undermined. According to the [editorial](#), successive special prosecutor investigations have acquired increasingly broad powers and larger organizational structures, while the safeguards intended to guarantee political neutrality have become weaker.

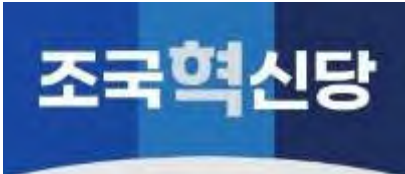
The [newspaper](#) regards the latest special prosecutor investigation as a particularly clear example.



Democratic Party of South Korea



People Power Party



National Innovation Party



Former President Yoon Suk-yeol
of the Republic of Korea April
255, 2023, in Maryland, USA

A partisan process?

The [editorial](#)'s principal criticism concerns the political circumstances in which the Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Team was established. The bill creating it was pushed through the National Assembly by the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK - 민주당), which currently dominates South Korean politics, together with other parties supporting President Lee's government. The opposition People Power Party (PPP - 국민의힘) opposed the legislation.

The [editorial](#) also objects to the arrangement for selecting the special prosecutor. It says that the right to recommend candidates was divided between the Democratic Party and the National Innovation Party (조국혁신당), which is politically aligned with the current government, while the PPP was excluded.

From [Segye Ilbo](#)'s perspective, this is a fundamental problem. If the governing political forces can establish a special prosecutor and control the process by which candidates are recommended, the newspaper argues, it becomes difficult to regard the resulting investigation as politically independent.

The [editorial](#) goes further, alleging that individuals connected with the investigation appeared on YouTube programs sympathetic to the government and expressed hostility toward former President Yoon and the PPP. It also criticizes what it describes as attempts to portray supporters of Yoon as supporters of the 3rd December 2024 martial-law declaration.

These claims form part of the editorial's broader argument that the special prosecutor system has moved away from its original purpose and increasingly resembles an instrument of political conflict.

A rapidly expanding system

The [editorial](#) places the current controversy in a wider context. Since President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) took office, **five special prosecutor teams have reportedly completed investigations**, while a sixth was preparing to investigate alleged irregularities

involving the 3rd June 2026 local elections.

At the same time, the Democratic Party is preparing legislation for another special prosecutor sinvestigation concerning allegations of what has been termed **"fabricated prosecutions"**. This proposal would target investigators involved in criminal cases in which President Lee himself has been implicated.

For [Segye Ilbo](#), this creates an especially striking contradiction. The Democratic Party has strongly promoted the principle of **separating investigation from prosecution**, a reform intended to reduce or eliminate prosecutors' traditional investigative powers. Yet, according to the [editorial](#), the party simultaneously supports special prosecutors who possess both **investigative and prosecutorial authority**.

The [newspaper](#) therefore questions whether the stated institutional principle is being applied consistently.

Ultimately, the [editorial](#) is not simply objecting to one particular investigation. Its broader argument is that **South Korea's special prosecutor system risks losing the independence and political neutrality that originally justified its existence**. In [Segye Ilbo](#)'s interpretation, what was initially designed as an exceptional safeguard for cases in which ordinary investigations could not be trusted has increasingly become a routine feature of political struggles.

The [editorial](#)'s central warning is consequently about more than the fate of former President Yoon or the current government. It asks whether South Korea is allowing an extraordinary investigative mechanism to become a **permanent instrument of political accountability - and, potentially, political retaliation**.

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Text. Knut Holdhus, editor

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Building bridges where others saw walls: When religious rivals sat down together demonstrating the power of dialogue



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

Continued from part 1: Building Bridges Across Korea's Religious Divide

세계일보

The logo of the Segye Ilbo

As religion reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) decribed in the first part of his [article](#) in the South Korean daily newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#) on 21st August, Lee Jae-seok (이재석), a devoted member of [Unificationism](#) (통일교) spent decades in an effort to build

bridges of dialogue between the faith organization [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) had [founded in 1954](#) and other religious communities in South Korea. In a country where religious and ideological divides often have been difficult to cross.

The encounter with Kang Won-yong

After a series of setbacks, Lee therefore decided to approach Kang Won-yong (강원용), one of the most influential Protestant leaders in Korea at the time. His message was straightforward: whatever one's opinion of [Unificationism](#), it had become a significant presence in Korean society and could not simply be ignored.

Lee wanted to persuade Kang that opposition and isolation were not productive strategies, and that a new relationship based on mutual understanding and cooperation should be explored.

Kang's busy schedule made a meeting difficult. When Lee learned that the Protestant leader would be travelling to Busan, he bought a ticket for the same flight. At Gimpo Airport, Lee approached him and explained that he had come because he wanted the opportunity to speak with him – even if that meant having the conversation aboard the airplane.



Rev. Dr. Kang Won-yong (1917–2006), refugee from North Korea, influential Christian leader, peace activist, and champion for democracy. He distinguished himself as a pioneer in the ecumenical movement (cooperation between different Christian denominations) and dedicated his life to dialogue, reconciliation, and social justice during South Korea's turbulent era of modernization and military dictatorship (1961–1987). Photo (1973): Chosun Ilbo (조선일보) / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped



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His persistence eventually produced a remarkable meeting.

An unprecedented religious encounter



Sun Myung Moon in September 1965. Photo: FFWPU

In September 1968, a gathering took place at Academy House in Suyu-ri, Seoul. Thirty leaders from established Christian churches met with ten representatives of [Unificationism](#), including [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명).

The meeting followed a formal program. Methodist theological leader Hong Hyeon-seol (홍현설) offered the opening prayer, Kang

Won-yong (강원용) delivered the opening remarks, and [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) gave greetings. Eu Hyo-won (유효원), then a leading figure in [Unificationism](#), presented its teachings, known as the [Unification Principles](#) (통일원리), followed by questions and answers.

The encounter did not develop into a sustained institutional dialogue between the two sides. Nevertheless, the meeting itself was significant. At a time when [Unificationism](#) was frequently treated by its Protestant opponents as an organization to be rejected rather than engaged, representatives of the two sides had actually sat down together and listened to each other.

For Lee, this was precisely the kind of encounter he had been trying to make possible.

From Christian dialogue to interreligious cooperation

Lee's ambitions eventually extended beyond relations between Christian denominations. He became involved in efforts to promote dialogue among different religions, working through the *Korea Institute for the Study of Religious Problems*, which brought together figures including Catholic and Anglican clergy.

In 1970, another important development followed. [Unificationism](#) became the eighth religious body to join what was then known as the *Korean Association of Religious People*, now the *Korean Council of Religions* (한국종교협의회).

This placed [Unificationism](#) alongside seven established religious traditions: Catholicism, Anglicanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Cheondogyo (천도교) [[See editor's note 1 below](#)], Won Buddhism (원불교) and Daejonggyo (대종교) [[See editor's note 2 below](#)]. The significance was not that these religions had suddenly reached agreement on theology. Rather, they were participating in a common forum where representatives of different traditions could communicate and cooperate.

Lee later became chairman of the *Council of Religions* in 1988, bringing his decades-long commitment to interreligious engagement into a formal leadership role.

A broader lesson about religious pluralism



"A Life Lived by Knowing God's Word as Life", the autobiography of Lee Jae-seok, published in 2021 by Cheonwonsa (천원사), the official publishing house of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#).

[Segye Ilbo](#)

acknowledges that Lee's activities and their historical significance can be viewed differently depending on one's religious perspective. Nevertheless, the [newspaper](#) identifies one characteristic of his life as particularly clear: **he refused to give up on dialogue.**

The [article](#) argues that religious harmony should not be understood as

eliminating theological differences. People do not have to agree about doctrine in order to recognize one another as neighbors or cooperate for the common good.

That message has relevance beyond Korea's religious history. Contemporary societies continue to be divided by religion, politics, ideology and generational differences. People are often tempted to determine first which group someone belongs to before considering what that person is actually saying.

For Lee, the central question was therefore not simply whether people agreed, but whether they were willing to meet.

His life, as presented by [Segye Ilbo](#), offers a particular answer to the question of how the social value of religion might be measured. It may not be measured only by the strength of a religious institution or the number of its followers, but also by its ability to **lower barriers, create relationships and bring people into conversation.**

For a member of a persecuted minority religion who had personally experienced rejection from established churches, Lee Jae-seok's decision to spend his later life building bridges rather than reinforcing divisions was, in the [newspaper's telling](#), the most important expression of his faith.

His legacy can therefore be summed up in a single word: **dialogue.**

Lee Jae-seok (이재석) was [blessed in marriage](#) with Jeong Won-gang (정원강) as one of the 36 couples on 15th May 1961. He served as the 5th president of the [Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity](#) (Unificationism or Unification Church) in Korea 1981–1988.

See also part 1: [Building Bridges Across Korea's Religious Divide](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Lee Jae-seok (이재석 – 1933-2021), here in 1981. Photo: [FFWPU](#), improved resolution by Grok xAI, August 2026.

[Editor's note 1:

Cheondogyo or **Cheondoism** (천도교, "Religion of the Heavenly Way") is a Korean religion that developed from the earlier Donghak ("Eastern Learning") movement. In 1905, the movement was reorganized and renamed by Son Byeong-hui (손병희 – 1861-1922) to emphasize its spiritual character and adapt to the changing political conditions of Korea under increasing foreign domination.



The flag of Cheondoism.
Photo: Aethelwolff Emsworth.
[Public domain image](#)

The central doctrine of Cheondogyo is Innaecheon ("Humanity is Heaven"), the belief that the divine resides within every human being. As a result, all people possess inherent dignity and should be treated with respect and equality. Cheondogyo stresses moral cultivation, social responsibility, and the improvement of society through ethical action rather than withdrawal from the world.

Unlike many religions that sharply separate the sacred and the secular, Cheondogyo teaches that everyday life is the proper arena for spiritual practice. Historically, its followers played a significant role in Korea's modernization and independence movement, including participation in the March First Movement against Japanese colonial rule.

Today, Cheondogyo remains one of Korea's indigenous religions, preserving the humanistic and reformist ideals inherited from Donghak.]



*The flag of **Daejongism** (대종교).*
Image: Baeksanseonin / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int.](#)
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[Editor's note 2:

Daejonggyo or **Daejongism** (대종교) is a modern Korean nationalist religion founded by Na Cheol (나철 – 羅喆) in 1909 that venerates the legendary progenitor Dangun (단군) as a divine ancestor,

emphasizing Korean identity, ethical living, reverence for Korea's divine origins, and spiritual renewal rooted in indigenous traditions.]

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