FFWPU Europe and Middle East: International Outcry Over Hak Ja Han Conviction

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Rev. Mark Burns, Sam Brownback, and Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett

Sekai Nippo

Growing international outcry over sentencing of octogenarian Mother Han as it sparks religious freedom alarm over South Korea's backsliding

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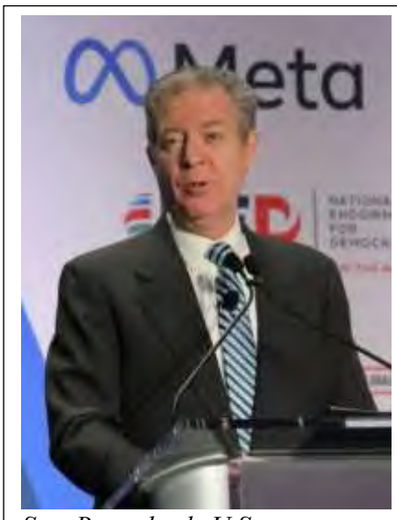
International Concerns Mount Over Prison Sentence for Hak Ja Han

NEWS Close-Up

by the International Affairs Department of Sekai Nippo

Religious Leaders and Human Rights Advocates Protest



Sam Brownback, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom 2018-2021

Concerns are mounting in the international community over the prison sentence handed down by South Korean judicial authorities to Hak Ja Han (한학자), leader of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU, formerly the Unification Church). Politicians, religious leaders, and human rights advocates have successively criticized the South Korean authorities and called for a review of the verdict, citing concerns over freedom of religion, human rights, and due process.

Former U.S. Senator Sam Brownback, who served as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom during President Donald Trump's first administration, pointed out [On X on 2nd September],

"South Korea's backsliding on religious freedom should be concerning to everyone."

Referring to the fact that the allegations forming the basis of the guilty verdict against Hak Ja Han came from a former senior official who had already been expelled from the organization, Brownback expressed concern that this "alarmingly shows that its judicial system is failing to live up to democratic standards."

He further criticized the treatment of Hak Ja Han as though she were a serious criminal, despite having no prior criminal record and suffering from serious health problems.

Brownback also referred to reports that the Chinese Communist Party is supporting the campaign to prosecute Hak Ja Han, saying that Hak Ja Han and the Family Federation have long been known for their

anti-communist activities, and the South Korean government should be wary of Chinese efforts to exert influence.

Rev. Mark Burns in October 2025 outside Seoul Detention Center, where Mother Han has been held

Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice

Voices defending Hak Ja Han have also emerged from religious circles. Rev. Mark Burns, one of President Trump's religious advisers, expressed [on X on 3rd September] "grave concern" over the verdict. Pointing out that Hak Ja Han is an international religious leader who has influenced millions of people around the world, Burns emphasized, "Governments must be extremely careful that criminal law is never used in a way that becomes a weapon against religious leadership, religious organizations, or people of faith."

He further noted that the freedom to worship, organize, speak out, and participate in public life are fundamental human rights, and called on the South Korean government to guarantee due process for Hak Ja Han and a fair and transparent appellate trial.

Burns also appealed to religious leaders of all faiths - including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism - to stand together in defense of religious freedom, transcending their differences in religious belief. He said,

"Religious freedom cannot depend upon whether we agree with another person's theology. You do not have to share someone's beliefs to defend their right to believe them."

Human rights organizations have likewise issued strong criticism.

The U.S.-based Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, headed by Katrina Lantos Swett, accused the South Korean government of targeting Hak Ja Han and described the verdict as "an unmistakable injustice".

After questioning the credibility of testimony that triggered the prosecution resulting in the conviction, the foundation stated [on X on 3rd September],

"It is shameful to witness a democratic government hounding and persecuting an 83-year-old religious leader like a criminal."

The foundation further argued that Hak Ja Han's "real crime" appears to be her principled opposition to communism. It also expressed serious concern over reports that the Chinese Communist Party is backing the prosecution, urging those who value religious freedom and democracy to closely monitor developments.

The foundation called on the South Korean government to uphold the values of a democratic nation committed to protecting religious freedom and argued that Hak Ja Han should be released while her appeal is being heard.

In South Korea, authorities have targeted not only Hak Ja Han, leader of the Family Federation, but also Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of the Presbyterian Segyero Church (세계로교회) and Lee Man-hee (95 - 이만희), chairman of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, for investigation or prosecution. Against this backdrop, former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have also expressed concern over the prison sentence imposed on Hak Ja Han, making the issue of religious freedom in South Korea a matter of growing international attention.

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Mother Han: Guilty Without Proof?

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Pointing out the dangerous politics behind South Korea's weaponization of justice, Introvigne concludes that Mother Han's guilty verdict is a miscarriage of justice

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Mother Han Appeal Tests Prosecutorial Authority

Did presiding judge Woo In-seong (image above) and his associates sentence Mother Han "leniently" to save the prosecutors' face *– as Introvigne suggests – in such a politically motivated case where the astonishing absence of concrete proof points to an obvious acquittal? Image: Grok xAI, 30th July 2026.*

The recent verdict by the *Seoul Central District Court* sentencing 83-year-old Hak Ja Han (한학자), leader of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (FFWPU), to two years in prison has sent shockwaves through the international human rights community. While a two-year sentence may appear "lenient" compared to the staggering thirteen years demanded by the prosecution, a closer analysis of the case reveals a deeply troubling reality.

See also International Outcry Over Hak Ja Han (83) Verdict

According to Dr. Massimo Introvigne, one of the world's leading scholars on new religious movements and a prominent activist for religious freedom, this trial is not a sober application of the law. Instead, it represents a **politically motivated campaign of retaliation** masquerading as judicial process, built on an astonishing absence of concrete proof.

Writing for *Bitter Winter* on 31st August 2026, Dr. Introvigne positions his publication with unwavering clarity: Hak Ja Han (한학자) – also referred to as Mother Han – is **innocent and should have been acquitted**. The specific case decided by the court centers on allegations that she authorized high-value gifts – specifically a Chanel handbag and a diamond necklace – to a former First Lady, alongside claims of illegal financial support to politicians.

Logo of Bitter Winter, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights.

Introvigne systematically dismantles the prosecution's narrative, pointing out that the **entire case rests precariously on the testimony of a single former** Family Federation **executive** who was expelled from the movement. This star witness possesses a glaring conflict of interest, having altered his timeline and narrative multiple times to mirror the prosecutors' shifting legal theories. Nothing in the official record demonstrates that Mother Han ordered, approved, or was even aware of the rogue executive's actions.

Furthermore, the financial scope of the allegations undermines the **prosecution's grand conspiracy theory**. The gifts and donations total less than $250,000 – an amount Introvigne notes is roughly equivalent to a modest apartment in Seoul. The notion that national and international political structures could be bought for such a sum is absurd. The massive discrepancy between the prosecutor's 13-year demand and the actual evidence suggests that the **state's primary objective was not justice**, but the **systemic destruction of the** Family Federation.

Lee Man-hee *(이만희 –*

To understand why this ruling is so dangerous, one must look at the broader context provided in the article. Introvigne notes that

Pastor Son Hyun-bo *(손현*

September 7, 2026

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95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth). Photo: MBC PD수첩 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp

Mother Han's

보) of Segyero Church in Busan, here August 2025. Photo: Bitter Winter

prosecution is part of a wider, systemic campaign by South Korean authorities against conservative and non-traditional religious groups. He explicitly points to the past harassment and arrests of other religious figures, such as Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) of Segyero Church (세계로교회) and Chairman Lee Man-hee (95 – 이만희) of Shincheonji [See editor's note below].

Segyero Church is a prominent conservative Presbyterian church led by Pastor Son Hyun-bo. It gained national attention for its fierce resistance to government overreach, particularly regarding strict state mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to legal standoffs over the right to assembly and worship.

Shincheonji (Shincheonji Church of Jesus) [See editor's note below] is a highly visible new religious movement founded by Lee Man-hee. The group faced intense legal and social scapegoating by South Korean authorities, who used expansive interpretations of the law to arrest its leadership and pressure its members.

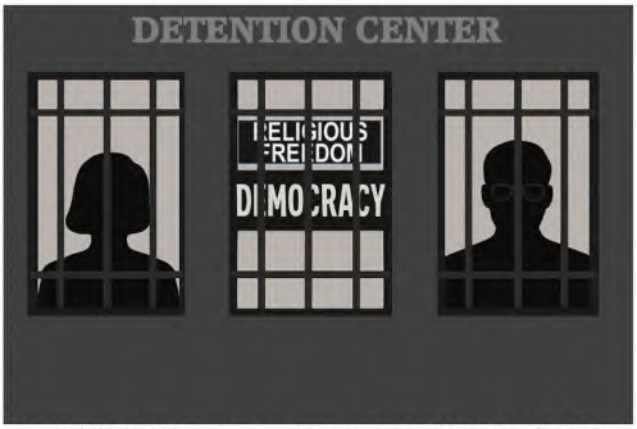
By drawing parallels to Segyero Church and Shincheonji, Introvigne demonstrates that South Korean prosecutors are **utilizing highly elastic interpretations of election and contribution laws** to effectively **criminalize the normal civic participation of religious believers**.

A Dangerous Precedent for Global Religious Liberty

The weaponization of the judicial system to target religious minorities has international ramifications. Introvigne highlights a disturbing geopolitical undercurrent: the anti-cult campaigns inside South Korea do not exist in a vacuum. They are **deeply intertwined with Japanese anti-cult organizations and have** ideological ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), both of which seek to dismantle these movements.

The trial of Mother Han in South Korea is heavily influenced by cross-border pressures, specifically the aggressive anti-cult movement in Japan following the 2022 assassination of Shinzo Abe and the totalitarian *Xie Jiao* doctrine exported by the *Chinese Communist Party*.

Xie Jiao (邪教) refers to organizations promoting **"heterodox teachings".** While often officially translated by China as **"evil cults,"** the doctrine is a legal and political designation used since imperial times to ban religious movements. The *Chinese Communist Party* applies this label to groups that operate outside state control, deify leaders, or threaten social stability. According to article 300 of the *Chinese Criminal Code*, it is dealt with as a crime to be an active participant in a xie jiao.



***Two religious heads (**Mother Han **and Son Hyun-bo) in long-term detention in South Korea** in flagrant violation of religious freedom and democratic rights. Illustration: Chat GPT 11th October 2025, edited manually.*

These external ideological and political forces have pushed the left-leaning Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration to adopt punitive legal measures against the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification*, thus threatening domestic religious pluralism.

When a democratic nation like **South Korea allows its prosecutors to pursue special missions against "heretical cults" using fragile, contradictory testimony, the rule of law itself is compromised**. The court's decision to grant a two-year sentence rather than thirteen may look like a compromise, but as Introvigne rightly asserts, **saving the prosecution's face at the expense of an innocent person's freedom is a miscarriage of justice**.

Ultimately, the case against Mother Han is a bellwether for the state of democracy in South Korea. When state actors treat religious communities as political adversaries rather than citizens with protected rights, religious freedom ceases to be a guaranteed liberty and instead becomes a privilege subject to the whims of the ruling political class.

See also International Outcry Over Hak Ja Han (83) Verdict

***Text**: Knut Holdhus, editor*

***Featured image** above: Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an Italian scholar specializing in the sociology of religion. He founded and serves as managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, an international network of academics focused on the study of new religious movements. He has authored around 70 books and over 100 scholarly articles in this field. Here, speaking in Geneva, Switzerland 16th June 2025. Screenshot from video by UPF. Image resolution improved by Grok xAI.*

[***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. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the *Book of Revelation* are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

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