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Project Title: South Korea’s Troubled Prosecutors’ Tradition

Abstract

*South Korea’s Prosecution Service began with the establishment of the Republic in 1948 but has devolved into “a scandal-ridden tool of political retaliation.” It is a threat to South Korean democracy. Governing authorities must investigate and implement ways to curtail unrestrained prosecutions.*

Research question

How did the South Korea’s Supreme Prosectors’ Office (SPO) attain power and what measures will curb its excesses?

Methodologies/Research Methods

1. Literature review and examination of scholarly and media coverage;
2. Conferrals with human rights professionals and activists, including those opposing the prosecution of religious leaders in South Korea.

Description of Findings

1. Following an era of authoritarian rule (1948-1988), South Korea ceded power from military figures to prosecutors;
2. Afterwards, unprecedented cycles of post-presidency prosecutions appear to be new administrations mobilizing prosecutors to wipe out their predecessors. In reality, it is prosecutors tightening their control over the country’s politicians;
3. Adherence to an inquisitional prosecutorial tradition is the structural root of South Korean prosecutors’ abuse of authority.

Conclusions/Next Steps

1. South Korea must reform its prosecutorial system. This has been recognized for decades and is a top priority in opinion polls.
2. At minimum, the government must end the prosecution service’s right to both investigate and indict. Beyond that, it needs to consider additional measures of democratic accountability.
3. Separate from political reform, South Korea should assess the impact of current prosecutions on human rights and religious freedom.

Major Sources Used for Research

- Chisholm, Neil. “Prosecutorial Independence Lost: How Prosecutorial Bureaucracy Is Politicized in South Korea.” *Emory International Law Review* 38:3, 2024
- Kim Ji-eun and Kwak Jin-san. “Goodbye to Korea’s prosecution service, a scandal-ridden tool of political retaliation.” *The Hankyoreh*, September 29, 2025.
- Seong Han-yong. “Korea’s politically empowered prosecutors will be the downfall of the republic,” 2022

Resultant/Planned Publications

- Submission of “South Korea’s Troubled Prosecutor Tradition” to *Bitter Winter: A magazine on religious liberty and human rights*
- Submission of an expanded version to the *Journal of CESNUR* or the *International Journal for Peace and Public Leadership*



Prosecution Service Headquarters



Unification Leader Hak Ja Han Detained

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