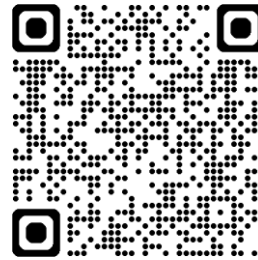


Biggest crisis yet for head of former Unification Church



<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/videos/20251113185340257/>

One of South Korea's most controversial religious movements has entered a critical juncture. The head of the group once called the Unification Church has been indicted with allegedly paying for political influence. As NHK World's Kim Chan-ju reports, it's not the group's first scandal, but it could be its most consequential.

Crowds of an organization still widely known by its old name, the Unification church, rally in the streets of Seoul. They say their faith is being persecuted and their leader falsely imprisoned. But authorities allege Han Hak-ja has been operating less like a religious icon and more like a crime boss. She's charged with embezzlement and bribing those close to the former President Yoon for favors. She even allegedly sent luxury goods to former first lady who faces her own legal battles. Through a spokesperson, Han has denied everything.

I've never instructed anyone to illegally appeal for political support or conduct illegal transactions with politicians.

But Professor Tark Ji-il, an expert on religions, says secretive and illicit dealings are par for the course.

For the Unification church, this is not a sudden or isolated incident, but rather a long-standing practice rooted in its history.

Han's late husband known as the reverend Moon Sun Myung founded the Unification Church in the 1950s. It became known for mass weddings, and its anti-communist stance made it politically useful during the Korean War.

South Korea military government at the time lacked legitimacy because it had taken control of the country through force. It needed loyal supporters who could help maintain its power. On the other hand, the Unification Church was regarded as heretical by most mainstream Christians and struggled to gain

acceptance. The group needed a powerful protector.

Even though Moon was convicted of tax evasion in the 80s, his group was thriving by the time he died in 2012.

This is the so-called Unification Church town, just outside Seoul. This is my first time seeing in person Palace like religious buildings where church leader Han Hak-ja used to live and that's not all. On top of that, there are so many other facilities like a restaurant, a café, schools, a hospital, a construction company. It really does feel like a small kingdom.

But recently it's faced hard times and scrutiny abroad. Especially in Japan where a court has ordered it to dissolve amid accusations of extorting followers. Now the spotlight is on its actions in South Korea. We met with one former member turned whistleblower who requested we keep his identity hidden. He joined in 1990 and went on to become a manager with an affiliated construction company.

My role was to convert a portion of the company's funds into so-called slush funds and use them for business investment. During that time, I came to understand how the money flowed, how the system worked.

He began to notice something was off with the finances.

The staff were very frustrated because they didn't know where all the money we had earned had gone. When I looked into it, I found that the money was being continually siphoned off elsewhere.

But after repeatedly demanding an audit, he was fired. The whistleblower says he's come to learn the extent of group's habit of taking on big projects, claiming big expenses, and diverting the cash for other purposes. He believes the leader Han stayed at arm length.

We only gave her basic reports, and she gave us broad guidance and feedback. Things like, proceed in this direction or you did a good job. What I mean is she didn't know the specifics, but don't be mistaken, she wasn't completely in the dark about what was happening.

Now criminal allegations tied to Han have come to light and she's facing the biggest crisis of her lifetime. As for her group, it says it is not involved in politics or any illegal acts, claiming the truth will come out in the trial set to start next month.

Now discuss the questions with a partner.

1. Do you know anything else about the Unification Church?
2. Why do you think the Unification Church was allowed to operate for so long?
3. Do you believe there should be stricter regulations for religions and cults?
4. Should religious organizations be allowed to engage in political activity?
5. If Han Hak-ja is found guilty, what do you think will happen to the church?