

The Traces Han Dong-hoon Left on South Korea

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English PDF edition

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The Traces Han Dong-hoon Left on South Korea is an online AI Library book by Kim Kyung-jin. It examines his record in justice policy, immigration reform, public institutions, and the structural questions facing South Korea.

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Chapter 1: The Night of December 3, 2024: Choosing Nation Over Faction

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Immediate declaration of martial law as unconstitutional, unanimous 190-vote resolution, decision that prevented bloodshed

On the night of December 3, 2024, Han Dong-hoon stood at a crossroads. On one path was a person he had spent the past twenty years with. On the other path was South Korea. He would have been safe had he sided with his close associate. He could have remained silent, pretended ignorance, or waited until morning.

Han Dong-hoon chose South Korea, not his close associate. He did not tolerate even an hour of the nation's misfortune over his own interests. He rushed to the National Assembly, stood in the voting chamber with eighteen legislators, and achieved a unanimous 190-vote resolution to lift martial law. He did not betray gratitude. He protected something greater than gratitude. A man who puts nation above faction, who worries first about the future of fifty million citizens rather than his own security.

This argument is heard often. Since the Democratic Party held a majority of National Assembly seats, the claim goes that the martial law dissolution vote would have occurred even without Han Dong-hoon's intervention.

The numbers suggest this is plausible. But the reality of that night differed from the numbers.

1 Without people present, numbers mean nothing in a vote

Lifting martial law requires a majority of seated National Assembly members to attend and vote. It is true that the Democratic Party held a majority of seats. But the number of seats and the number of people physically in the chamber are different. When the military blocked the National Assembly, its goal was precisely to prevent those people from entering the chamber.

Soldiers and police encircled the National Assembly. Even if legislators arrived, they could not enter. No matter how many seats a party held, it meant nothing without members physically present in the chamber.

2 That night, who was there and who was absent

Democratic Party Chairman Lee Jae-myung was hidden in a wooded area within the National Assembly. The opposition leader did not appear publicly to stand against martial law. Reform Party Chairman Lee Jun-seok did not come to the National Assembly, citing police blockades. Democratic Party member Kim Min-seok, who had repeatedly warned of the martial law possibility, represented a district in Yeongdeungpo, the closest area to the National Assembly, yet did not appear there.

When crisis strikes, a person's true nature is revealed not by their customary words but by their actions in that moment.

3 What did Han Dong-hoon do

Chairman Han Dong-hoon moved the moment he learned of the martial law declaration.

First, he immediately issued a message: "We will stop this unlawful emergency martial law together with the people." The ruling party chairman directly opposed the martial law declared by his own party's president. This message spread nationwide in real time. Citizens gained momentum, and the martial law forces fell into deep confusion. The fact that even the ruling party had abandoned them shook the legitimacy of martial law to its core.

Second, he repeatedly sent messages to soldiers not to participate in the unlawful martial law. This action undermined the morale and cohesion of the martial law forces from within. From the soldiers' perspective in the field, there was now no reason to stake their lives on a martial law that even the ruling party chairman called illegal.

Third, he convened an emergency leadership meeting and led legislators through the police barrier to enter the main chamber of the National Assembly. This scene was broadcast live nationwide. The ruling party chairman breaking through the police line to enter the National Assembly against his own president's martial law. That image completely shifted the atmosphere. Hesitant legislators moved toward the Assembly, and citizens gained confidence that they could prevail.

4 Let me use a soccer analogy

We can say that with eleven players on the team, the match would have occurred regardless of who was missing. But in the final five minutes of the second half, when tied 1-0, no one would tell the player who scored the equalizer, "Another player would have scored without you." The value of a person who takes decisive action at a decisive moment has meaning simply by the fact of their presence.

What Han Dong-hoon did was not simply adding one vote. The fact that the ruling party chairman turned his back on the president and sided with the constitution created the decisive atmosphere for lifting martial law. Martial law was not lifted because the Democratic Party held a majority. It was lifted because the ruling and opposition parties stood together. And the man who created that "together" was Han Dong-hoon.

5 If Han Dong-hoon had not stepped forward

What would have happened if Han Dong-hoon had remained silent? What if the ruling party had sided with the president?

Martial law would have become a fight between the ruling and opposition parties. The military and police would have followed the president's and ruling party's orders. The blockade of the National Assembly would have been harsher, and legislators' entry into the chamber far more difficult. The

longer martial law remained in effect, the higher the possibility of violent clashes.

It is true that the Democratic Party was the majority. But what stopped martial law that night was not the number of seats. It was the will to protect the constitution, the action of rushing to the National Assembly despite the danger, the decision to stand with the nation rather than with one's own faction. That is what stopped martial law.

And Han Dong-hoon was the first to send that signal of resolve.

To answer this question, we must examine how Yoon Suk-yeol actually behaved that night.

1 He resisted even after unanimous passage with both ruling and opposition parties

At 1:01 a.m. on December 4, 2024, the resolution demanding the lifting of emergency martial law passed unanimously in the main chamber of the National Assembly, with all 190 seated members voting in favor. This was the result of opposition members and eighteen members of the People Power Party breaking through the military blockade to enter the chamber and participate in the vote. Article 77, Clause 5 of the Constitution is clear. If the National Assembly requests the lifting of martial law by majority vote, the president must comply.

But Yoon Suk-yeol did not lift martial law immediately. Between 2 and 4 a.m., he visited the underground bunker of the Ministry of Defense headquarters in Yongsan, the so-called determination room, to confer with military leaders on countermeasures. He resisted for more than three hours even in the face of the unanimous resolution that united both parties. Only at 4:27 a.m., three hours and twenty-six minutes after the assembly vote, did he announce through a statement his decision to lift martial law. During those three and a half hours, the withdrawal of military forces was delayed, and the nation remained in a state of tension.

2 What if it had been a Democratic Party-only resolution

This is a man who resisted for three and a half hours even in the face of unanimous passage by both parties.

If the resolution had passed with only Democratic Party members, without the ruling party, Yoon Suk-yeol would have had grounds to resist.

"This is a political maneuver by an opposition party captured by anti-state forces. The ruling party did not consent. This is not a true consensus of the National Assembly."

Using such logic, he likely would have refused to lift martial law or delayed it far longer. Beyond simply exercising a veto, he might have continued mobilizing troops and forcefully pursued arrest operations against opposition members. A man who remained barricaded in the determination room until 4:27 a.m. in the face of unanimous passage would hardly have quietly stepped aside before a decision by the opposition alone.

3 Time favored the martial law forces

The longer martial law continued, the more it favored the side that declared it. As time passed, additional military forces would be deployed, communication controls would be tightened, and arrests of key figures would proceed. This is precisely why Yoon Suk-yeol dragged out three and a half hours even after the vote at 1:01 a.m.

If it had been only an opposition party resolution, those three and a half hours could have become six hours, or even twelve. If martial law had extended until the next morning, massive clashes would have erupted in front of the National Assembly and the presidential office, and South Korea would have entered an irreversible path.

4 The meaning of the number 190

A Democratic Party-only resolution would be legally valid. A majority of members present voting in favor would suffice. But what was needed that night was not merely legal validity.

The power to make soldiers lower their guns. The power to make Yoon Suk-yeol, barricaded in the determination room, unable to resist further. The power to give citizens certainty that "this is over." That is what was needed.

One hundred ninety members in unanimous agreement. The entire National Assembly of South Korea, without distinction between ruling and opposition parties, declared in a single voice: "This martial law is unconstitutional." That weight was a substantive political resolution that forced even military leadership to conclude "we can no longer sustain this." A martial law without justification, abandoned even by the ruling party. This understanding took firm root in both the military and the people.

To say that martial law would have been lifted even with an opposition-only resolution is to ignore process and focus only on outcome. That early morning, every minute and second was directly tied to citizens' safety. The unanimous agreement that Han Dong-hoon created between ruling and opposition parties was the fastest, surest, and safest way to end martial law.

And that is why it was able to end at 4:27 a.m., still the earliest possible time.

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Chapter 2: The Man Who Safeguarded 6 Trillion Won

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Lone Star, Elliott, Schindler: Three ISDS Victories

The Man Who Safeguarded 6 Trillion Won: Han Dong-hoon's Three Victories in Battles Everyone Said He Would Lose

Chapter 1: The Lone Star Investigation, The Night of a Thirty-three-Year-Old Prosecutor

On a late night in 2006, the lights were on in the 7th floor of the Central Investigation Division of the Seoul District Prosecutor's Office in Seocho-dong.

The glittering night view of Seoul flickered across the glass window, but the thirty-three-year-old prosecutor inside the office had no time to notice. Stacks of documents reaching tens of thousands of pages were piled on the desk, and empty cups of instant coffee filled the wastebasket. Prosecutor Han Dong-hoon was wrestling with numbers all night, highlighter in hand.

The case he was investigating was Lone Star.

This massive private equity fund based in Texas acquired Korea Exchange Bank in 2003 for 1 trillion 383.4 billion won. During a time when the wounds of the foreign exchange crisis had not yet healed, the government had to quickly sell the troubled bank, and Lone Star seized that opportunity.

The problem came after.

While merging Korea Exchange Bank and Korea Exchange Card, Lone Star spread rumors in the market about a capital reduction to lower merger costs. Capital reduction causes share prices to fall. Investors, gripped by fear, sold off their Korea Exchange Card shares, and the stock price plummeted. Lone Star then merged Korea Exchange Card at a bargain price based on the depressed share price.

Everyone could have predicted this. But no one could easily prove it.

Lone Star had the world's best legal advisors, and their logic appeared ironclad. The materials transferred from the Financial Supervisory Service contained only suspicious circumstances, with no decisive evidence to prove guilt in court.

Prosecutor Han Dong-hoon had just completed the Hyundai Motor Group investigation and was preparing to return to his assigned office. His superiors gave him another assignment. He was assigned to the Lone Star case alongside a fellow prosecutor.

When he first reviewed the case files, he felt despair. He had suspicions but no tangible evidence.

But Han Dong-hoon did not back down.

He slept in the prosecutor's office five nights a week. He would lie down on the couch with a newspaper as his blanket, wake before dawn, and go back through the files. No one forced him to do this. It was a hardship he chose for himself.

His decisive move was a search and seizure at the foreign investment bank that had served as Lone Star's advisor. A compulsory investigation of a foreign financial institution was taboo at the time. Superiors, concerned about diplomatic friction, urged caution, and some voices said, "We'll only suffer international embarrassment if we interfere."

Han Dong-hoon convinced the court. A warrant was issued.

And in that dawn, among tens of thousands of seized emails, he finally found the decisive evidence.

Right at the moment when Lone Star announced its capital reduction plan, emails exchanged between staff members contained this sentence: "Capital reduction is not a matter for discussion." While publicly creating fear in the market by appearing to consider capital reduction, internally they had already abandoned the plan. It was deliberate dissemination of false information. It was stock price manipulation.

Han Dong-hoon recalls that moment this way: "I wanted to show justice against their arrogance in taking South Korea lightly."

Based on this evidence, he summoned the foreign executives and, after rigorous questioning, obtained a confession. The court rejected the arrest warrant for the Lone Star Korea representative four times. There was invisible tension between the judiciary and prosecutors, and hints of external pressure coming from somewhere. Through it all, he did not give up.

The trial lasted 10 years.

Even after receiving a transfer to the Busan District Prosecutor's Office, which some saw as a demotion, Han Dong-hoon went up to Seoul twice a week to attend hearings. This case was not merely work for him. It was a matter of South Korea's national pride.

In 2011, the Supreme Court finally confirmed Lone Star's guilt for stock price manipulation. The representative was sentenced to three years in prison.

This verdict was not merely the punishment of one criminal. It was a historic event in which South Korea's judiciary officially confirmed that Lone Star was an unscrupulous capital that committed crimes.

No one knew at the time. That a single guilty verdict that Han Dong-hoon had uncovered and secured would become the only weapon to save South Korea from an astronomical lawsuit of 6 trillion won 20

years later.

Chapter 2: Lone Star ISDS, The Decisive Move That Safeguarded 6 Trillion Won in National Interests

In November 2012, Lone Star filed a lawsuit against the South Korean government at the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) under the World Bank.

The amount claimed was 4.6795 billion dollars. At the exchange rate at the time, it was over 6 trillion won. It was the largest international lawsuit in South Korean constitutional history.

If it is hard to grasp the scale, think of it this way. 6 trillion won is enough to provide free school meals to all elementary school students across the country for 10 years. It is a budget sufficient to build an entirely new subway line 2 in the Seoul metropolitan area.

Lone Star's logic was this: "We tried to sell Korea Exchange Bank, but the Korean government unfairly delayed approval of the sale while watching public opinion. As a result, we suffered enormous losses." On the surface, it was a plausible claim. It was an attempt to pocket huge profits from a bank acquired at a bargain price, then extract several more trillion won by claiming that the sale approval was delayed.

Bureaucrats were bewildered. A defeatist sentiment of "let's settle and reduce the amount" began spreading in government circles.

But the key to changing the course of this battle was already there. It was the criminal guilty verdict that young Prosecutor Han Dong-hoon had secured in 2011.

There is a principle in international law called the Clean Hands Doctrine. It means that one with dirty hands cannot seek the protection of the law. Lone Star had committed the crime of stock price manipulation, and South Korea's Supreme Court had confirmed it as guilty. They could argue that the Korean government's delay in approving the sale was not unwarranted interference but a legitimate response to a criminal investigation.

A single line of an email that Han Dong-hoon had found 20 years earlier returned as the defense logic that protected 6 trillion won of taxpayer money.

Throughout his career as a prosecutor, Han Dong-hoon carried the records of this case like a burden of life. Every time he moved, he brought copies filling an entire truck. Most government officials who knew the lawsuit well had retired, and he was virtually the only active official who fully understood this case from beginning to end.

In August 2022, the results of the first arbitration award were announced. The arbitration tribunal rejected most of Lone Star's claim of 6 trillion won but ruled that South Korea should compensate approximately 216.5 million dollars, roughly 280 billion won. The majority opinion acknowledged Lone Star's stock price manipulation while recognizing some responsibility on the part of the Korean government for delaying approval, while the dissenting opinion explicitly stated, "Because Lone Star engaged in stock price manipulation, compensation liability is zero."

This dissenting opinion was evidence that the stock price manipulation guilty verdict that Han Dong-hoon had designed and proven was valid even on the international stage.

At this time, what blocked Han Dong-hoon's path was not Lone Star but politicians from his own country. An opposition member said that putting forward Han Dong-hoon in a low-odds appeal process would be cruel false hope, making them a traitor. A broadcaster asked, "With interest accumulating, shouldn't Han Dong-hoon take responsibility?" Another member attacked the Lone Star stock price manipulation investigation itself as inadequate. "This is cruel false hope through a fight with no chance of winning." "If we lose, Han Dong-hoon should pay out of his own pocket." Curses mixed with attacks poured in from all sides.

Looking back, their actions were bullets fired not from enemy lines but from friendly forces. While the Minister of Justice fought against the massive speculative capital of Lone Star, politicians from the same country pulled the trigger on his back.

Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon's thinking was different. "Even if the probability of success was not 100 percent, the government had to work night and day to make it 100 percent. How could I turn a blind eye to a criminal who committed stock price manipulation taking away precious national funds?"

The probability that an ICSID arbitral award would be overturned was statistically less than 10 percent. Even legal experts advised that "annulment is extremely unlikely." Practically speaking, paying 280 billion won and ending the matter seemed like the safe choice.

He did not surrender to the odds.

In an internal meeting, he reportedly said: "If this goes wrong, I will take responsibility. But let us not say we should not do it." He was equally firm with his staff: "Do not try to protect me. I will protect you."

What civil servants fear most is bearing responsibility when they fail. Han Dong-hoon took that fear upon himself.

He firmly refused demands to replace the litigation counsel. The law firm representing the government had previously won a case against Lone Star. He protected his staff and the counsel team with the principle: "One does not change commanders in the middle of war."

In August 2023, he established the International Legal Affairs Bureau within the Ministry of Justice. Until then, response to international litigation had been handled by a small organization with only a handful of staff. Han Dong-hoon elevated this to the bureau level and significantly expanded the expert personnel. Under the bureau, he created three departments, the International Legal Affairs Policy Division, the International Legal Affairs Support Division, and the International Investment Dispute Division, and stationed 25 personnel. Han Dong-hoon explained: "ISDS cases are costly because we lack domestic capacity and must rely on foreign law firms. With experience, we can respond adequately ourselves, protect national interests, and save costs." This International Legal Affairs Bureau became the core foundation for defending South Korea not only in the Lone Star case

but in all subsequent international disputes.

That August, he stood before the press. "This is blood-earned tax revenue. It is the precious property of our people. The Ministry of Justice will challenge the award and file for annulment. We have a winning case."

Many shook their heads. They said it was like striking a rock with an egg. He held a hammer that could crack the rock. It was a conviction he had carried for twenty years.

On November 18, 2025, the final ruling came down. The ICSID annulment committee entirely annulled the original award requiring the Korean government to pay compensation to Lone Star. Compensation: zero won. Lone Star's initial claim of approximately 6 trillion won was reduced to 280 billion won in the first award, and under Han Dong-hoon's leadership, the annulment petition ended in complete victory, not a single won to pay. South Korea would even recover approximately 7.2 billion won of its litigation costs. It was a dramatic reversal unparalleled in international arbitration history.

When the verdict was announced, the Prime Minister of the Lee Jae-myung administration called it "a triumph for the new government" in a briefing. Han Dong-hoon responded, "It is a strange sight, like one who cursed the players for ninety minutes straight, then rushed onto the field to hoist the trophy upon winning the match." Those who had previously opposed the appeal and attacked Han Dong-hoon fell silent or changed their tune. The words "traitor" vanished, and no one mentioned the "interest responsibility theory" again.

Noteworthy was the reaction of the current justice minister, who stood at the opposite political pole. He described Han Dong-hoon's decision as "a well-executed act and a conviction-driven decision worthy of praise." He acknowledged that, setting aside factional logic, the decision was right for the national interest.

Han Dong-hoon calmly shared his thoughts: "I simply did what I had to do. Because this money is not mine but belongs to the people of this nation."

Chapter 3: The Elliott ISDS, Threading the Needle

Before the Lone Star dispute was resolved, another international lawsuit file lay on Han Dong-hoon's desk. This one was from Elliott Management, an American activist hedge fund, targeting the South Korean government.

In 2015, South Korea's largest electronics conglomerate pursued a merger among its subsidiaries. It was intended to secure management succession, but controversy arose over merger terms unfavorable to one shareholder. Elliott, which held shares in the subsidiary at the time, opposed the merger, but the proposal passed when the National Pension Service cast a vote in favor.

After the merger, the state affairs crisis erupted, overturning the situation. It was revealed that the government at the time had pressured the National Pension Service to support the merger, and criminal convictions against those involved were finalized. Elliott used this as grounds to file, in July

2018 under the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, an ISDS claim for approximately 1 trillion won.

After five years of dispute, in June 2023, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that the Korean government must pay Elliott approximately 160 billion won in principal damages of about 60 billion won plus interest. The PCA determined that while the National Pension Service was not a state organ under Korean law, it could be considered a de facto state organ.

Han Dong-hoon thought differently. The National Pension Service is not a state organ. Therefore, he believed the award treating the National Pension Service's actions as government actions was fundamentally flawed. In July 2023, less than a month after the ruling, he himself held a briefing and announced that he would file an annulment petition in the English courts.

The success rate for ISDS annulment petitions was only about 3 percent in recent years. This meant putting the nation's name behind a case with a 97 percent probability of loss. Attacks poured down in the same pattern as before. "Han Dong-hoon should even be charged with breach of duty for filing an annulment petition." "Will you pay the interest instead?" The pattern was identical to the Lone Star case.

Han Dong-hoon did not waver.

The annulment petition went through three stages in the English courts. It was dismissed at the first stage. In August 2024, the English High Court dismissed the lawsuit. The Korean government appealed. In July 2025, the English Court of Appeal reversed the first decision and remitted the case back to the High Court. Then, on February 23, 2026, in the remand hearing, the English High Court finally ruled in favor of the Korean government.

The English court cited the fact that the National Pension Service has separate legal personality from the government, that the management of public pension funds does not constitute a core state function like national defense or public order, and that the National Pension Service's routine decisions are not entirely subordinate to the government. The very logic that Han Dong-hoon had made central to his annulment petition was upheld intact, two years and seven months later.

Upon hearing of the victory, Han Dong-hoon immediately issued a statement: "Following the Lone Star case, the people of South Korea have won in the Elliott ISDS annulment petition as well. I thank the civil servants and others who did their best to protect our precious tax revenue."

However, the Elliott case is not completely concluded. With the English court remitting the award, further arbitral proceedings remain. In another case by hedge fund Mason, which claimed damages from the same merger process, compensation of approximately 86 billion won was already confirmed, so additional dispute is anticipated in subsequent arbitration. Yet the essential point remains unchanged. Han Dong-hoon succeeded in challenging the 3 percent odds and overturning an award for approximately 160 billion won in damages.

Chapter 4: The Schindler ISDS, The Designer's Victory

While the Lone Star and Elliott cases were pending, another international lawsuit was approaching South Korea.

Schindler, a global elevator company headquartered in Switzerland, filed an ISDS claim against the South Korean government in 2018. The claim amount was approximately 320 billion won.

In this case, Han Dong-hoon's role differed from that in Lone Star or Elliott. In Lone Star, as a prosecutor, he directly investigated and secured a guilty verdict. In Elliott, as justice minister, he disregarded criticism and decided to file an annulment petition. In Schindler, he neither conducted investigations nor made litigation decisions himself. What he did was lay the foundation and draw the blueprint to win this battle.

The International Legal Affairs Bureau he established in August 2023 was precisely that blueprint.

The International Legal Affairs Bureau established three divisions under its authority. The International Legal Affairs Policy Division handled legal consultation on treaty conclusion and international negotiation, the International Legal Affairs Support Division oversaw international dispute prevention and legal review, and the International Investment Dispute Division managed ISDS response and operational matters. The work previously handled by small teams in two divisions was expanded to one bureau with three divisions and a staff of twenty-five.

Because of this organization, the government could recruit an international arbitration specialist. The first director appointed to lead the International Legal Affairs Bureau was an expert who had practiced law at a U.S. law firm and had served as mediator and arbitrator at international arbitration institutions. This director led the operational work on the Lone Star annulment petition and subsequently oversaw the Ministry of Justice's response in the Schindler case.

The head of the responding team at the law firm representing the government in the Schindler case stated, "This was a difficult case involving three complex issues: international arbitration, finance, and fair trade regulation. Experts from each field worked together as one team to logically and consistently demonstrate the international law validity of government regulation." The International Legal Affairs Bureau served as the control tower, coordinating external law firms, the Fair Trade Commission, the Financial Services Commission, the Financial Supervisory Service, and other relevant agencies.

On March 14, 2025, the Permanent Court of Arbitration dismissed Schindler's claim entirely. It was a complete victory requiring no payment of the full 320 billion won.

Han Dong-hoon commented on the news: "This is thanks to the expertise and patriotism of the civil servants and others in the International Legal Affairs Bureau, which I established with the highest priority as justice minister." He defined his role as the designer who created the system and placed the credit for the work squarely on his staff.

And he added one more point: "In the Lone Star and Elliott cases, opposition politicians and civic leaders strongly obstructed by saying 'either pay with your own money or do not sue,' but in the

Schindler case they did not obstruct to that extent." By winning consecutively in Lone Star and Elliott, the very criticism of "pursuing a hopeless lawsuit" could no longer be voiced.

Chapter 4 Conclusion: What the Three Victories Left Behind

In 2003, there was a thirty-three-year-old prosecutor deployed to the Lone Star investigation. Over the course of more than twenty years, he carried the case records with him, filling a truck bed worth of moving boxes. Even when transferred, he came to Seoul to attend trials. As justice minister, he challenged 97 percent odds to sue in the name of the nation. Though criticism poured in from all directions, he did not waver. And after leaving office, he witnessed the organization he had built deliver a third victory.

In Lone Star, he escaped liability for approximately 400 billion won in compensation. In Elliott, he overturned an award for approximately 160 billion won. In Schindler, he defeated a claim for 320 billion won entirely. He threaded the 3 percent needle twice and secured a complete victory in the third battle.

Han Dong-hoon spoke as follows.

"In the end, we could fail. But if self-interest does not taint public decisions, I can accept responsibility for the outcome. There is no free lunch. If something is gained, something must be surrendered."

"Courage is not the absence of fear and anxiety. Courage is acting while feeling them."

This story shows how one person's expertise and courage can change a nation's fate. Someone who said no when everyone urged surrender, who fought to the end. His twenty years left this lesson for South Korea.

Justice does not protect itself. It is protected through someone's courageous decisions and relentless effort.

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Chapter 3: Standing with 14 Million Retail Investors

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Traces Han Dong-hoon Has Left on South Korea

Abolishing the Financial Investment Income Tax

Standing with 14 Million Retail Investors: Han Dong-hoon and the Abolition of the Financial Investment Income Tax

1. What Was the Financial Investment Income Tax?

The Financial Investment Income Tax, or FIIT for short. It was a system that levied taxes on income earned from financial investments such as stocks, bonds, funds, and derivatives if annual income exceeded 50 million won. Following the principle that "where there is income, there is taxation," the bill was passed in December 2020 by bipartisan agreement during the Moon Jae-in administration. It was originally scheduled to take effect in 2023, and was later postponed to January 2025.

On the surface, it sounds reasonable. If you made a lot of money from stocks, shouldn't you pay taxes? But reality was far more complicated.

Starting in 2022, the securities transaction tax was being lowered in stages in preparation for implementing the FIIT. In other words, it was a trade-off: lower the transaction tax in exchange for collecting the new FIIT. However, as the FIIT implementation was repeatedly postponed, the transaction tax had been reduced while the FIIT was not being collected, creating a "tax revenue gap." Conversely, if the FIIT was implemented as scheduled, investment income would face double taxation on top of the already-reduced transaction tax, raising concerns about investor exodus.

Above all, what retail investors feared was market contraction. In a situation where profits from the Korean stock market would be taxed while overseas market investments would remain under the existing capital gains tax system, it was inevitable that the domestic stock market would lose its appeal. This was the common concern of 14 million retail investors.

2. From General Election Platform to Party Leader's Agenda

On January 2, 2024, President Yoon Suk-yeol announced at the stock market opening ceremony that he would push to abolish the FIIT. The People Power Party aligned with this and made the abolition of the FIIT a campaign pledge for the 22nd general election.

Han Dong-hoon was at the forefront of this pledge. As chairman of the People Power Party's emergency response committee at the time, Han Dong-hoon led the general election campaign and

pushed the abolition of the FIIT as one of the key livelihood pledges.

However, the election results were a crushing defeat. With the People Power Party winning only 108 seats, the outlook for abolishing the FIIT became uncertain. The structure was such that without the approval of the major opposition party with 175 seats, the bill could not pass.

Han Dong-hoon did not give up. After being elected as chairman of the People Power Party on July 23, 2024, he declared from the very first supreme council meeting: "I will make realizing policies most urgent to people's livelihoods, including the abolition of the FIIT, our top priority."

3. Han Dong-hoon's Strategy: Public Opinion Campaign and Ground Pressure

For a minority opposition leader with 108 seats to change the position of the ruling party with 175 seats, the battle had to be fought outside Parliament, not inside it. Han Dong-hoon's strategy was to rally investor opinion and encircle the Democratic Party.

On August 27, Han Dong-hoon visited the Korea Exchange in Yeouido, Seoul. He chose the securities sector as the location for his first field meeting since taking office as party chairman. He met with the exchange president and industry practitioners and stressed the necessity of abolishing the FIIT. He also broadened the front by mentioning corporate inheritance tax issues and separate taxation of dividend income, going beyond the FIIT abolition.

"Let us reduce gaps in housing, assets, care, and education. Through value-up policies for the capital market, we must create more ladders for asset formation and make them more accessible. That is why the People Power Party is focusing on abolishing the FIIT."

He framed the FIIT not as a simple tax issue but as a matter of "reducing asset inequality" and "enabling young people to build assets." The logic was that this was not about cutting taxes for the wealthy, but about protecting young people and the middle class who were accumulating assets through stocks.

On September 1, Han Dong-hoon raised the FIIT as a key agenda item in his first inter-party meeting with Democratic Party Chairman Lee Jae-myung. Outside the meeting room, in front of the National Assembly's main gate, retail investors from the Korea Stock Investors Union were holding a rally urging the Democratic Party to abolish the FIIT.

On October 4, he attended an investor rally in front of the National Assembly and pressured the party, saying: "The Democratic Party will change its position anyway, but postponement and abolition are completely different. Since you're changing course, please choose the abolition that 14 million investors truly want."

The core of Han Dong-hoon's position was demanding "abolition" rather than "postponement." A postponement, with implementation two years later, would leave uncertainty. Investors knew that the same debate would repeat two years down the line. Han Dong-hoon consistently advocated for "complete abolition" from beginning to end.

4. The Democratic Party Reverses Its Position

The Democratic Party was internally divided. The leadership, centered on Policy Committee Chairman Jin Seong-jun, took the position that "it should be implemented as planned." They based their argument on the principle that "where there is income, there is taxation" and the logic that abolishing the FIIT would benefit only the top 1%.

However, the backlash from 14 million retail investors was fierce. Comments demanding the abolition of the FIIT flooded Policy Committee Chairman Jin Seong-jun's social media accounts. The Korea Stock Investors Union held rallies in front of Democratic Party headquarters. Protest messages poured in to Democratic Party members.

The decisive variable was Democratic Party Chairman Lee Jae-myung himself. As the backlash from individual investors grew, Lee directly stepped in and shifted his position, advocating caution. The Democratic Party also began reviewing its hardline party position internally.

Then, on November 4, 2024, the Democratic Party officially announced its agreement to abolish the FIIT.

Han Dong-hoon responded immediately: "While the Democratic Party is late, late as it is, I welcome its decision to join in the complete abolition of the FIIT. In the end, on livelihood matters like this, there are no ruling or opposition camps."

It is notable that he repeated "while late" twice. He subtly but clearly pointed out that this was the result of months of pressure he had applied.

5. The Final Hurdle: Voting Under Martial Law

Even after the Democratic Party agreed to abolition, a difficult path remained to pass the bill. In early December 2024, the ruling and opposition parties were in a state of extreme confrontation over the budget bill. As the FIIT abolition bill was pushed to the back burner, retail investors even sent protest messages to Democratic Party members calling them "traitors to South Korea."

On December 3, an unprecedented state of emergency martial law was declared. Even as the political world fell into chaos, the FIIT abolition faced an imminent January 1, 2025 implementation date and could not be delayed any further.

On December 10, 2024, an amendment to the Income Tax Act that included the abolition of the FIIT and a two-year postponement of cryptocurrency taxation was put to a vote in a plenary session of the National Assembly. It was passed with 204 votes in favor, 33 against, and 38 abstentions out of 275 members present.

204 votes in favor. An overwhelming number. Not only People Power Party members but also a significant number of Democratic Party members voted in favor. It was a complete reversal of the Democratic Party's position that, just three months earlier, had insisted on implementing it as planned.

6. What One Person Changed

The credit for abolishing the FIIT cannot be attributed to Han Dong-hoon alone. President Yoon Suk-yeol declared the abolition, FSC Chairman Lee Bok-hyun echoed him by calling forced implementation a "cowardly decision," 14 million retail investors took to the streets, and even within the Democratic Party, Chairman Lee Jae-myung shifted his position.

But in the midst of all these developments, it was Han Dong-hoon who consistently spoke only of "abolition," organized public opinion, visited the field, pressured the opposition, and placed the issue on the negotiation table.

As emergency response committee chairman, he sowed the seed as a general election campaign pledge. Though the election was lost, he did not give up. As soon as he became party leader, he made it his first agenda. He opened the front at the Korea Exchange field meeting. He directly demanded it at inter-party leadership talks. And he went to investor rallies and raised his voice alongside them.

Changing the party line of a party with 175 seats with only 108 seats is impossible by the logic of numbers alone. Han Dong-hoon used public opinion as his weapon instead. He proved that the voice of 14 million investors was stronger than the number of seats in Parliament.

"In the end, on livelihood matters like this, there are no ruling or opposition camps."

This was what Han Dong-hoon said right after the FIIT abolition. This single sentence summarizes the essence of this struggle. The abolition of the FIIT was neither a victory for the ruling party nor a defeat for the opposition. It was solving a problem directly connected to the daily lives of 14 million citizens by transcending factional boundaries. Han Dong-hoon was the person who wielded the hammer needed to break through that wall.

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Chapter 4: Prosecutor Han Dong-hoon: A Man Who Rose for South Korea

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The traces Han Dong-hoon has left on South Korea

A prosecution philosophy free from partisanship, a person who conducted investigations like an independence movement

On the claim that Yoon Suk-yeol elevated Han Dong-hoon's career and raised him

There are claims that Yoon Suk-yeol raised Han Dong-hoon from the beginning. This narrative has come from those who envy and slander Han Dong-hoon. It is an old story, a repeated story, and thus a story that has hardened into accepted fact.

But objective records tell a different story. To be precise, they tell the opposite story.

In 2003, Criminal Division 9 of the Seoul District Prosecutor's Office. Han Dong-hoon, then two years into his career as a prosecutor, was present at a search and seizure operation regarding accounting fraud at the third-largest conglomerate. It was he who secured the key document the investigation team needed most, the so-called "report document." The group's chairman was arrested. Han Dong-hoon was only thirty years old at the time.

We must identify who directed this investigation. At that time, the chief of Criminal Division 9 was Prosecutor Yi In-gyu. He was a skilled investigator of corporate crimes who later served as chief of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's Central Investigation Division. Under Yi In-gyu, Han Dong-hoon broke through on his first major case. Yoon Suk-yeol was merely one of several prosecutors dispatched from the Gwangju District Prosecutor's Office and assigned after this case expanded to the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's Central Investigation Division. It was not Yoon Suk-yeol who discovered and developed Han Dong-hoon, but Yi In-gyu. Even Yi In-gyu himself wrote in his memoir that Han Dong-hoon's abilities showed "exceptional logical insight and penetrating understanding of the essence of matters."

The same applies to subsequent investigations. In 2004, at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's Central Investigation Division. A case involving the ruling party's representative illegally receiving presidential campaign funds. This investigation was led by Investigation Division Chief Ahn Dae-hee and Investigation Planning Manager Moon Hyo-nam, with Yi In-gyu joining the investigation team. Yoon Suk-yeol was also one of the dispatched prosecutors at the time. Han Dong-hoon was also a dispatched prosecutor. The two were merely teammates on the same investigation team, not in a superior-subordinate relationship. The fact that Han Dong-hoon was one of the investigators who

secured testimonies about 100 billion won in political slush fund flows was only recently confirmed.

In 2006, again at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's Central Investigation Division. After completing his studies at Columbia Law School in the United States, Han Dong-hoon returned and took charge of investigating a slush fund case involving a major domestic automobile group as a Prosecutors' Research Official. Slush funds of approximately 1.38 trillion won came to light and the group's chairman was arrested. That same year, the Lone Star foreign exchange bank sale case. In Lone Star-related investigations, it was Han Dong-hoon's investigation alone that yielded a guilty conviction. This judgment later became the defense argument by which South Korea protected 6 trillion won in national interest in the Lone Star ISDS. In these investigations, Han Dong-hoon's direct superior was the then-Chief of the Investigation Division, not Yoon Suk-yeol. Yoon Suk-yeol was in a completely different position at that time.

In 2007, the Special Investigation Division of the Busan District Prosecutor's Office. A bribery case involving the incumbent National Tax Service Commissioner. It was the first time in South Korean prosecutorial history that an arrest warrant was sought for the sitting head of tax administration while in office. The leadership of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office urged a non-arrest approach. Han Dong-hoon traveled from Busan to Seoul and met the Prosecutor General directly. He said he would stake his position. The warrant was sought, and the Tax Service Commissioner was arrested. This investigation has no connection to Yoon Suk-yeol. The chain of command was different, the department was different, and the investigation target was different. It was accomplished solely through Han Dong-hoon's own judgment and determination.

To summarize: among the major cases that brought Han Dong-hoon recognition as a prosecutor, there were none that Yoon Suk-yeol directed as his direct superior prior to the 2016 Special Prosecutor investigation. From 2003 to 2007, those who built Han Dong-hoon's investigative career were Yi In-gyu, Ahn Dae-hee, and the chiefs of each division. Yoon Suk-yeol was merely a senior prosecutor with whom he worked on the same investigation teams.

Then where is the basis for the claim that he was raised from the start?

An in-depth reporting article from Monthly Joong Ang made this point clear. At the time in 2003, Han Dong-hoon was a new prosecutor in his second year, and legal community figures testify that it would be difficult to trace the connection between the two back to that period.

In the 2016 Special Prosecutor investigation, Yoon Suk-yeol was the investigation team leader, and Han Dong-hoon was in charge of investigating the chaebol chairman. When the first arrest warrant was rejected, it was Han Dong-hoon who personally appeared in the second warrant review hearing and secured the arrest. Han Dong-hoon's investigation was at the center of praise for the Special Prosecutor achieving the best results to date. It is true that in the Moon Jae-in administration, Yoon Suk-yeol was selected as chief of the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office and Han Dong-hoon was assigned as Deputy Chief Prosecutor. However, even then, it was Han Dong-hoon who led the key operational work, including the investigation into the arrest of the former president and the investigation into misuse of judicial administrative authority.

To be honest, it is rather the opposite. It is more consistent with the record to say that Yoon Suk-yeol received recognition as a "star of the prosecution" thanks to the investigative abilities of capable junior prosecutors, including Han Dong-hoon. For an investigation team leader to shine, the investigators must produce results. Han Dong-hoon was a prosecutor who produced results.

Rather, the record points in the opposite direction.

In 2012, Yoon Suk-yeol investigated the National Intelligence Service's rigged comment case and then clashed directly with the Park Geun-hye government. He was demoted to a provincial post. Within the prosecution, Yoon Suk-yeol was treated as a persona non grata. No one came near him.

At that time, Han Dong-hoon was one of the few people who remained by Yoon Suk-yeol's side. When Yoon Suk-yeol came to Seoul on weekends, the two would walk Namsan in shorts. They had few overlapping interests privately and little to talk about, it is said. They simply walked side by side in silence. He was there beside a man whom no one sought out. Looking at objective records alone, it is correct to say that during his prosecution career, Han Dong-hoon actually helped Yoon Suk-yeol more.

Behind the claim that he was "raised from the start" lies a logic of ownership. The logic that since he is a person I created, he must follow my will regardless of South Korea's fate. That is not friendship between a senior and junior. It is a relationship between master and creation. Han Dong-hoon rejected that relationship, and that rejection preserved the Constitution of South Korea on the night of December 3, 2024.

There is one more point to consider.

Yoon Suk-yeol once said this about Han Dong-hoon when he was a presidential candidate. "A person who has conducted investigations like an independence movement." What did this acknowledge? It acknowledged the fact that Han Dong-hoon has conducted investigations by his own strength, by his own conviction, and while taking on his own risks. An independence movement is not something that someone carries you along to accomplish. It is something you take on yourself.

Looking at Prosecutor Han Dong-hoon's career chronologically, Yoon Suk-yeol was merely one of the companions along that long journey, not the creator of that journey itself. In prosecution history, Han Dong-hoon is the only prosecutor who arrested the chairmen of both the first- and third-ranking business conglomerates in South Korea. He is also the only prosecutor who staked his position to arrest a sitting National Tax Service Commissioner. That is not a career anyone can create by raising.

Everyone is the protagonist of their own life. Prosecutor Han Dong-hoon walked on his own two feet from the start, conducted investigations by his own judgment, and sought arrest warrants by staking his position. And at the final moment, he chose the Constitution over twenty years of friendship.

A person you have raised can be set down. A person who has risen on his own, no one can set down.

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Chapter 5: How to Protect My Child

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The traces Han Dong-hoon left on South Korea

Korean-style Jessica Law and lowering the age of criminal responsibility for juveniles

Not putting Cho Doo-soon next to my children - Han Dong-hoon and the Korean-style Jessica Law

1 The origin of the name Jessica

In February 2005, a nine-year-old girl named Jessica Lunsford, who lived in Florida, went missing. The search ended with the discovery of the girl's body. The perpetrator was John Couey, a sex offender who lived next door. He had previously served time for sexual crimes. After being released from prison, he lived without any restrictions right next to an elementary school, and he kidnapped and murdered the neighbor's child.

The enraged state of Florida enacted 'Jessica's Law' the same year. The law's core provision is clear: child sexual offenders are prohibited from residing within 1,000 to 2,000 feet (approximately 300 to 600 meters) of schools, playgrounds, and childcare facilities after their release. The law subsequently spread to more than thirty U.S. states.

2 The repeated nightmare in Korea

Korea experienced similar horrors repeatedly.

In December 2020, child sex offender Cho Doo-soon was released after serving his twelve-year sentence. He returned to his previous residence in Ansan, Gyeonggi Province. The victim's family lived in the same neighborhood. Residents took to the streets in protest, but there was no legal way to prevent him from living there. In the end, the victim's family moved away. It was a result where the victim, not the perpetrator, was driven out.

In 2022, Park Byung-hwa, a serial sex offender known as 'Hwaseong Bal-bal-i,' was released and chose to establish his residence in Hwaseong, Gyeonggi Province. The mayor of Hwaseong and residents held protests demanding his eviction. The same year, another child sex offender, Kim Geun-sik, was released. A nationwide controversy erupted over where he would live.

The structural problem was the same each time: there was no legal basis for the state to intervene in where a high-risk sex offender would live after completing his sentence. The existing system's limits were electronic monitoring, assigning probation officers, and publicly disclosing personal information. It was impossible to prevent him from living next to a school or across from a childcare facility.

3 Han Dong-hoon: 'Now is the time'

Han Dong-hoon directly referenced the American Jessica Law in his 2023 New Year's address. He stated: 'We must actively consider ways to adopt this law to fit our country's circumstances and reality, and implement groundbreaking measures.'

On the 26th of the same month, the Justice Ministry included the 'Korean-style Jessica Law' as one of five key initiatives in its presidential briefing. Han Dong-hoon diagnosed that while measures existed to protect society from high-risk sex offenders, they were insufficient, and he declared his intention to create legislation suited to Korea's domestic environment by reviewing overseas cases.

In fact, the National Assembly had previously introduced several bills restricting where sex offenders could live. Bills were proposed prohibiting offenders from residing in the same city, county, or district as their victims, or expanding the exclusion zone from 100 meters to 1 to 2 kilometers. However, each time these bills failed, argued to be violations of the constitutional right to freedom of residence.

Han Dong-hoon did not avoid this issue; he attempted to break through it directly. Rather than simply declaring 'you cannot live here,' he chose an active management model: 'you must live in a state-designated facility.'

4 Specific details of the bill

On October 24, 2023, the Justice Ministry announced draft legislation on 'the restriction of residence for high-risk sexual violence offenders' and revisions to the 'law on chemical castration treatment for sexual offenders.'

The bill's scope does not cover all sex offenders. It applies only to high-risk offenders: those convicted of sexual crimes against children under thirteen and sentenced to ten or more years in prison, or those with three or more sexual convictions. According to the Justice Ministry, 325 high-risk sex offenders needed review for residence restriction orders as of the end of 2022. It was expected that 50 to 60 of them would be released each year.

The procedure works as follows: The head of the probation office determines whether residence restriction is necessary based on the subject's age, health, and living environment. If deemed necessary, the official applies to the prosecutor for a restriction order. The prosecutor then conducts a separate review and petitions the court. The final decision rests with the court. The design ensures that the executive branch does not make decisions arbitrarily but undergoes judicial review.

When a court issues a residence restriction order, it designates the offender's residence among state, local government, or public institution facilities within the metropolitan area where the offender resides, specifically those designated as 'designated residential facilities' by the Justice Minister.

Along with residence restriction, chemical castration treatment was strengthened. The revision requires that prosecutors conduct mandatory medical evaluations for high-risk sex offenders and petition for chemical castration treatment orders for those diagnosed with paraphilic disorders. The

rationale was statistics showing that sex offenders who received chemical treatment had a recidivism rate of 1.3 percent, substantially lower than those who did not receive treatment (10 percent).

This bill was designed so that if it passed the National Assembly, it would be retroactively applied to those already released, including Cho Doo-soon, Kim Geun-sik, and Park Byung-hwa.

5 The fork in the road between support and opposition

As expected, the bill sparked heated debate.

The logic of those in favor is intuitive: children must be protected. An analysis of the residences of 138 sex offenders in the Daegu region showed that 77 of them (56 percent) lived within 500 meters of elementary schools. The argument is that it is irresponsible for the state to allow someone who has committed atrocious crimes against children and has a high risk of reoffending to live right next to a school.

The concerns of those opposed cannot be ignored either. The argument arose that this constituted double punishment of someone already punished through imprisonment and carried the risk of being unconstitutional as it violated the right to freedom of residence guaranteed by the Constitution. Issues were also raised concerning residential opposition to areas where designated facilities would be located and the problem that personal detention amounts to re-imprisonment in practice.

Han Dong-hoon did not shy away from this controversy. He emphasized: 'I understand how anxious the public has been each time a predatory high-risk sex offender is released. Through the Korean-style Jessica Law, the state will punish these offenders more severely and manage them more thoroughly.' At the same time, after the public hearing period, he added provisions allowing target sex offenders to request changes to their residence and ensuring that mental health counseling and treatment would be provided by the state and local governments.

While being mindful of concerns about unconstitutionality and human rights violations, he did not yield on the value of children's safety.

6 Accomplishing 'the obvious thing'

On January 2, 2024, the Korean-style Jessica Law passed through a cabinet meeting. This came shortly after Han Dong-hoon stepped down as Justice Minister. The legislation was conceived and drafted during his tenure, and the final cabinet hurdle was passed on to his successor.

In December 2020, when Cho Doo-soon was released, the entire nation was outraged. Yet outrage alone did not change the law. For more than two years afterward, no government and no minister was able to implement Jessica's Law. Four characters, 'constitutional concerns', blocked every attempt.

Han Dong-hoon broke through those four characters. Knowing that constitutional concerns existed, he struck a balance in the bill's design by building in judicial review as a safety mechanism, attaching chemical treatment as a supplementary measure, and adding a residence change request process as a remedy. Rather than choosing only one side between children's safety and a criminal's basic rights,

he considered both but ultimately placed the scale's weight on the children's side.

325 people. As a number, it is not large. But if one of these 325 people lives on the path where my child walks to and from school, then the number 325 is meaningless to that child's parent. That one person next to my child is everything.

Han Dong-hoon declared that the state would manage that one person, each individual. He pushed through something no other minister had done, bearing the cost of constitutional concerns. His principle of being strong against the strong and protecting the weak runs through this bill as well.

'I'm a juvenile delinquent so I can't be punished' - a standard seventy years old

1 A country where a thirteen-year-old can pick up a knife and not go to prison

Juvenile delinquent. When you first hear this word, you tilt your head in confusion. To explain it simply: it refers to a minor who committed an act in violation of the law but cannot face criminal punishment because of his or her age.

South Korean criminal law does not assign criminal responsibility to anyone under fourteen years of age. Whether a youth aged ten to thirteen commits murder, robbery, or sexual assault, he or she cannot be sent to prison. Instead of criminal punishment, protective measures under the Juvenile Law , community service, attendance at educational programs, probation, commitment to a juvenile detention facility , are possible.

This standard was established when the Criminal Law was enacted in 1953. It has been maintained for approximately seventy years. Are thirteen-year-olds seventy years ago the same as thirteen-year-olds now? Seventy years ago, there were many children who could not even attend elementary school. Today's thirteen-year-olds use smartphones, access all the world's information through the internet, and in many cases show physical development approaching that of adults. Yet the standard for criminal responsibility remained frozen as it was half a century ago.

The problem was that people began to exploit the gaps in this system.

2 'I'm a juvenile delinquent, so what are you going to do about it?'

As justice minister, Han Dong-hoon diagnosed this problem in the following way. "There have been cases where the juvenile delinquent system was actively misused for criminal conduct. There have even been cases where minors below the criminal responsibility age were brought in to commit crimes."

Adult criminal organizations used children under fourteen as tools for their crimes. Since children could not face criminal punishment even if caught, dangerous roles were assigned to them. Among children themselves, the phrase circulated that "I'm below the criminal responsibility age, so police can't do anything to me." The system that the law had created to protect children was now having the opposite effect, turning children into instruments of crime.

The numbers tell this story. Crimes committed by juveniles below criminal responsibility age jumped from 7,897 cases in 2017 to 12,502 cases in 2021. This represented a nearly sixty percent increase in just four years. Among all juvenile crimes, the proportion of violent crimes rose from 2.30 percent in 2005 to 4.86 percent in 2020, more than doubling. Among violent crimes, the proportion of sexual offenses surged from 48.55 percent to 86.22 percent during the same period.

The problem was not simply that crime was increasing. The nature of the crimes was changing. Groups would assault victims while recording videos to post on social media, then threaten the victims with additional violence. Society grew fearful, and victims and their families were enraged. Yet because the perpetrators were under fourteen, they could not be brought to criminal court.

3 The Ministry of Justice's Four-Month Review

Shortly after taking office, in June 2022, Han Dong-hoon formed a task force to update the age threshold for criminal responsibility. It brought together experts from within the Justice Ministry, researchers specializing in juvenile justice, and practical field workers. The task force had three questions to address. First, what age should the threshold be lowered to? Second, would lowering it alone be sufficient? Third, what complementary measures would need to accompany the change?

The task force debated whether to lower the threshold to twelve, thirteen, or apply different standards by offense type. President Yoon Suk-yeol had promised in his campaign to lower it to twelve, reducing the age by two years. Instead of simply adopting the presidential pledge, however, the Justice Ministry conducted its own independent assessment of the appropriate threshold.

Four months later, on October 26, the Justice Ministry announced its conclusion. It would lower the age for criminal responsibility from the current fourteen to thirteen, a one-year reduction.

Why thirteen rather than twelve? The Justice Ministry offered three reasons. First, the country needed protection from increasingly brutal juvenile crimes. Second, children aged thirteen comprised approximately seventy percent of those who received juvenile protective dispositions below the criminal responsibility age. Third, Korea's educational system divides elementary and middle school at age thirteen.

The seventy percent figure deserves close attention. Seven out of every ten children below criminal responsibility age who received protective dispositions were thirteen years old. Those aged ten, eleven, and twelve combined accounted for only thirty percent. This meant that the weight of juvenile crime was concentrated at age thirteen. The judgment was that including just that one age group in criminal liability would substantially prevent misuse of the juvenile protection system.

4 Punishment Combined with Rehabilitation and Protection

What Han Dong-hoon devoted the most effort to in this policy was not actually the age reduction itself. It was the remaining elements of the Comprehensive Juvenile Crime Prevention Plan that he announced alongside the age change.

Han Dong-hoon stated, "I reflected concerns that lowering the age of criminal responsibility alone would not be sufficient as a measure against juvenile crime." Sending children to prison should be a last resort. He designed a plan that addressed what could be done beforehand and what needed to be done afterward.

The ministry improved conditions in juvenile facilities. It reduced the size of dormitory rooms in youth detention facilities from ten to fifteen beds to four beds, and raised meal allowances to the level provided by child welfare institutions. Juvenile facilities are not punishment institutions but educational ones. To ensure that children do not repeat crimes after returning to society, the environment during their detention must maintain at least basic human dignity.

Education was also strengthened. Working with the Education Ministry, juvenile facilities were included in the First Comprehensive Plan for Guaranteed Basic Learning, and required courses for high school equivalency exams were introduced in juvenile prisons. A new juvenile correction facility focused on academic education would operate in the Seoul metropolitan region. It provided children who had lost educational opportunities a path back to learning.

Tailored psychological treatment programs for juvenile sex offenders were developed, and victim-centered education was introduced. This education helps perpetrators understand the pain their actions caused their victims.

Victim protection was significantly strengthened. The notification system for victims in juvenile protection proceedings was improved, and provisions granting victims the right to attend court hearings were established. Legal grounds were also created to prohibit perpetrators from contacting victims through telecommunications such as social media and phone calls. Previously, even after receiving juvenile protective dispositions, perpetrators could contact or threaten victims through social media. Now this could be prevented by law.

Human rights protections were not overlooked either. The practice of imposing excessive protective dispositions such as long-term probation and commitment to youth detention on pre-delinquent youth was abolished, and new rights were established allowing juveniles to challenge the court's emergency decisions.

It was a multilayered approach that lowered the threshold for punishment while improving the quality of punishment, strengthening the effectiveness of rehabilitation, protecting victims, and safeguarding the human rights of perpetrators.

5 The Logic of Opposition and Han Dong-hoon's Response

Opposition to this policy was considerable. The National Human Rights Commission declared it 'inadvisable.' The chief grounds for opposition were that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child had recommended maintaining a minimum age of criminal responsibility at fourteen or higher, and concerns about creating a generation of minor offenders with criminal records.

The Justice Ministry responded with a clear rebuttal. Its position was: 'International human rights standards have no legal force domestically, and the age of criminal responsibility varies by country depending on cultural characteristics and social environment.' It cited the fact that many countries, including France, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, have criminal responsibility ages below thirteen.

It also prepared countermeasures against concerns about creating minor offenders with records. The Justice Ministry explained, 'Even if the age for criminal responsibility is lowered, most juveniles would still be referred to juvenile court as before, and only very exceptional cases such as premeditated murderers or the most violent offenders are expected to face criminal prosecution.' Additionally, to minimize disadvantages in schooling and employment, it examined ways to restrict record disclosure for crimes committed at age thirteen.

6 Between Punishment and Protection

The core of Han Dong-hoon's Comprehensive Juvenile Crime Prevention Plan lies in the recognition that strengthening punishment and strengthening protection are not contradictory.

Children must be protected. That principle does not change. But when protection becomes a framework with no accountability, gaps in that structure allow more children to be exploited for crime and more children to be harmed. A paradox emerges where the very system designed to protect children actually puts them in danger.

Han Dong-hoon saw through this paradox. Lowering the age by one year might appear to be merely symbolic. But given that seventy percent of juveniles below criminal responsibility age are concentrated at thirteen, this one-year difference is a measure that fundamentally changes the system's effectiveness.

At the same time, improving juvenile facility conditions, strengthening education, introducing psychological treatment, and codifying victim protection send the message: 'We are not trying to imprison children, but to return them to society.'

Han Dong-hoon stated, 'I concentrated policy capacity on addressing juvenile crime, which had long remained an intractable challenge, and developed a comprehensive plan that addresses not only the age of criminal responsibility but also strengthens correction and rehabilitation, improves victim protection and human rights safeguards, and expands infrastructure.'

He stepped forward to change a standard that no one had touched for seventy years, grounding that change in four months of empirical review. In making the change, he did not design it as punishment alone but paired it with rehabilitation and protection. To punish the child while not abandoning the child. That was the philosophy Han Dong-hoon embedded in this policy.

7 The Seed Was Sown, But the Fruit Is Not Yet

However, the comprehensive plan has not yet been completed as law.

In December 2022, the Justice Ministry submitted amendments to the Juvenile Law and Criminal Code to the National Assembly. The Supreme Court's Administrative Office submitted an opposing statement, saying 'It is difficult to definitively conclude that thirteen-year-olds possess the capacity for criminal responsibility.' The National Human Rights Commission also reaffirmed its position that the change was 'inadvisable,' citing recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

With opposition from the Supreme Court's Administrative Office, the Human Rights Commission, and the opposition party, the bills stalled at the legislative committee stage of the National Assembly. Even during President Yoon Suk-yeol's administration, related bills never made it to a full parliamentary vote.

The seed Han Dong-hoon planted began to move again three years later. In December 2025, President Lee Jae-myung instructed that the matter be added to the National Cabinet agenda, saying at a Justice Ministry briefing, 'Lately there have been people claiming they are below the criminal responsibility age while causing various incidents, and arguments are arising that the threshold should be lowered.' Justice Minister Jung Sung-ho agreed, saying, 'Wouldn't it also be necessary to lower the threshold for drug offenses and sexual crimes?'

But this time, too, the path was not smooth. The minister of gender equality and family took an effectively opposing stance by saying 'careful deliberation is needed,' and opinions within the government itself became divided. If disagreements between the Justice Ministry and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family are not resolved, legislation could again drift without progress.

Meanwhile, juvenile crime below the criminal responsibility age did not stop after Han Dong-hoon announced his comprehensive plan in 2022. Arrests of juveniles below criminal responsibility age nearly doubled from 11,677 in 2021 to 21,095 in 2025 in just four years. The escalating brutality that Han Dong-hoon warned about is now proven by the numbers, yet the legal tools to stop it remain bound by standards from seventy years ago.

What does not change is the fact that in 2022 Han Dong-hoon was the first to frame this issue not as political rhetoric but as a policy package supported by data and comprehensive measures, placing it in the public arena. The comprehensive plan he designed, lowering the age, improving juvenile facility conditions, strengthening education, and codifying victim protection, will serve as a starting point regardless of which future government addresses this problem. The seed has been sown. Bearing fruit remains the task of the National Assembly and the people.

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Chapter 6: Unlocking the Latch Sealed for 57 Years

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The Revision of the State Compensation Act and the Mother of Private Hong Jung-gi

Opening the Latch Sealed for 57 Years: The Revision of the State Compensation Act and Han Dong-hoon's Promise

1 A Mother's Eight Years

In March 2016, seven months after enlisting in the Army, Private Hong Jung-gi's body began showing bruising. Vomiting and headaches followed. The regiment's medical unit confirmed a drop in platelets but returned him saying it was not an emergency. On the same day, a private hospital said there was a high possibility of leukemia and that detailed examination was necessary, but the battalion commander, upon receiving the report, did not send him to a higher-level hospital. When his condition worsened and he was taken to the division hospital's emergency room, the attending military doctor, judging his vital signs normal, did not evacuate him. An attempt to transfer him to the Military Hospital in Chuncheon also fell through due to lack of available beds.

Private Hong Jung-gi developed complications less than a month after falling ill and passed away without ever learning his diagnosis. He was twenty years old.

His mother, Ms. Park Mi-sook, held the military authorities accountable. But the answer was a wall: the prohibition on double compensation. The principle is that even if a soldier dies or is injured in the line of duty and receives compensation under another law, they cannot claim damages from the state. Since she had already received death compensation, she could not pursue a damages lawsuit challenging the state's negligence.

She had raised her son for twenty years and sent him to serve the nation, yet he did not return. The state's negligence was unmistakable. Yet the law itself, and the state, prevented her from seeking accountability.

2 The Latch of 1967

This wall was built in 1967. When soldiers deployed to the Vietnam War began receiving compensation through lawsuits, the Park Chung-hee government, concerned about fiscal burden, revised the State Compensation Act to provide only compensation to fallen and disabled soldiers while blocking damage claims.

In 1971, the Supreme Court ruled this provision unconstitutional. In response, the Park Chung-hee regime, drafting the Yushin Constitution in 1972, embedded the prohibition on double compensation

directly into the constitution. Since the Supreme Court had ruled it unconstitutional, the provision could have been overturned at the statutory level. That is why they cemented it into the constitution.

For more than half a century after that, soldiers and police risked their lives in service, yet when they died due to state negligence, their families received only fixed compensation. No solace for grief, no accountability for state fault, these were not permitted. The latch set up to preserve finances when the nation was poor continued to block the path of military families for more than fifty years, even after the nation had grown wealthy.

3 Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon: "Now It Is Time for Change"

In 2023, the lawsuit by Private Hong Jung-gi's family lost in the first trial. Though the court acknowledged the state's negligence, it ruled that compensation was impossible due to the prohibition on double compensation. The court indirectly recommended settlement, asking the state to pay the family 25 million won as consolation and offer an apology.

The Justice Ministry, representing the government in litigation, rejected the settlement recommendation, citing difficulties in accepting it under current law. However, Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon at the time, expressing sympathy for the problems inherent in the prohibition on double compensation, promised to push for a revision of the State Compensation Act and submitted a government legislative proposal.

"I judged that change is needed and that now is the time for it. I will amend the State Compensation Act to open a path for families to seek independent consolation damages."

The Justice Minister is the government's representative in litigation. In cases where the state is a defendant, his duty is to stand on the state's side. Yet Han Dong-hoon had sided with the family, technically his ministry's opponents in court. To uphold the law while changing it if flawed. To hold to principle while seeing the person beyond the principle. That was Han Dong-hoon's way.

On December 15, 2023, Ms. Park Mi-sook, mother of Private Hong Jung-gi, met with Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon at the Government Complex in Gwacheon. The meeting lasted more than an hour.

Han Dong-hoon said, "You have endured so much. It is you who will change this law. It is something that should naturally be done, and I believe there will be no disagreement in the National Assembly." After hearing about other military death cases from families, he asked questions about the case progression and took notes.

"It is you who will change this law." In this statement to the family, the minister conveyed an understanding that the agent of change would be the victim themselves, not the government or the National Assembly. It was a different tone from the typical politician's "I will solve this for you."

On October 24, 2023, a revision to the State Compensation Act allowing families of fallen military and police personnel to seek consolation damages passed the Cabinet meeting. However, with the expiration of the 21st National Assembly's term, the bill was discarded.

4 Party Leader Han Dong-hoon Keeps the Promise

Even after leaving office as Justice Minister, even after becoming party leader, Han Dong-hoon did not let go of this promise.

On November 26, 2024, Han Dong-hoon met with Ms. Park Mi-sook, mother of Private Hong Jung-gi, again at the National Assembly. This time he came as party leader, not as justice minister. His title had changed, but the woman sitting across from him was the same mother.

Han Dong-hoon said, "A nation's dignity is determined not only by who it produces but by whom it remembers." He continued, "When our nation was truly impoverished, we lacked the means to properly honor and compensate, so we even amended the constitution to block paths to compensation for military fallen soldiers, and that constitution remains in place today." He then promised, "Even without amending the constitution, the family's right to seek consolation damages can be recognized through revising the State Compensation Act. The cause is too compelling not to complete this legal revision as quickly as possible."

A nation's dignity depends not on who it produces but on whom it remembers. In this single sentence lies the compressed reason why Han Dong-hoon was so committed to this bill. A nation that tells the families of soldiers who sacrificed their lives for it, "You have already received compensation, so there is no further responsibility." Han Dong-hoon could not accept such a nation's dignity.

5 December 10, 2024: Change After 57 Years

On December 10, 2024, the revision to the State Compensation Act passed the National Assembly plenary with 284 votes in favor and 2 against out of 286 members present. It was virtually unanimous.

The core of the amendment is that families of fallen and deceased soldiers and police officers can now seek consolation damages from the state. The latch that had blocked the path of families for 57 years since 1967 has been opened.

On the same day, a package of bills substantially improving treatment for military personnel passed together. Revisions to the Military Personnel Disaster Compensation Act, Civil Servants Disaster Compensation Act, and Civil Servants Pension Act also passed the plenary, adjusting pension payment criteria for families of fallen military personnel and civil servants based on their posthumous promotion rank. Also passed was a revision to the Basic Law on Military Personnel Status and Service, allowing reduction or exemption of criminal liability when military personnel cause harm to others during lawful duty performance without intent or gross negligence; a revision to the Military Personnel Act specifying a 120-day deadline for families of fallen soldiers to request reconsideration; and a revision to the Basic Law on Military Personnel Welfare allowing properties with obsolete military facilities to be prioritized for sale for military welfare purposes.

It was not just the amendment to the State Compensation Act. The entire system surrounding military life and death was comprehensively reformed all at once.

6 The Minister's Promise, the Party Leader's Fulfillment

Tracing the history of these bills back to their origin, Han Dong-hoon stands at the starting point. In 2023, as Justice Minister, he acknowledged the injustice of the prohibition on double compensation and submitted an amendment. When the 21st National Assembly discarded it, he became party leader and pushed it through again in the 22nd National Assembly. He met with Private Hong Jung-gi's mother twice, once as minister and once as party leader, made the same promise both times, and kept it.

After her son's death, Ms. Park Mi-sook, mother of Private Hong Jung-gi, met with major figures from both parties and advocated for a legal revision. A mother carrying the grief of losing her child, moving through the halls of the National Assembly. A politician who answered her plea and changed the law. Han Dong-hoon told that mother, "It is you who will change this law." And to make the law she sought to change actually change, he walked in the same direction both from the position of justice minister and as party leader.

A nation where families of soldiers who died protecting it must cry out, "Is my child worth less than a dog?" Changing such a nation's law is not a monumental political achievement. He simply did what should naturally be done. Yet the reality of this nation was that this naturally necessary task had been neglected for 57 years. Han Dong-hoon was a person who put that abandoned natural duty into action. That is another manifestation of this principle: rigorous against the strong, merciful to the weak. Not merely being strict about the powerful's wrongdoing, but answering the cry of the vulnerable. For Han Dong-hoon, this balanced approach to justice was both a prosecutorial philosophy and a way of life.

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Chapter 7: Reviving Yeouido's Grim Reaper

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The Traces Han Dong-hoon Has Left on South Korea

The Revival of the Joint Securities Crime Investigation Team and the Shield for Ordinary People

The Revival of the Joint Securities Crime Investigation Team

Yeouido's Grim Reaper Returns: Han Dong-hoon Restores the Shield for Ordinary People on His First Day in Office

On the afternoon of May 17, 2022, in the auditorium of the Ministry of Justice at the government complex in Gwacheon, Gyeonggi Province, Han Dong-hoon was reading his inauguration address as the 69th Minister of Justice. At 49 years old, he was the youngest prosecutor-turned-minister in Korean constitutional history. He was appointed without a confirmation report adopted, and the opposition party with 180 seats was targeting him. The tone of his inauguration address was measured, but the first action it contained was swift and decisive.

We must urgently examine the state of economic crimes that victimize ordinary people and respond swiftly. I will take the first step by reviving the 'Joint Securities Crime Investigation Team' today, immediately.

The words 'today, immediately' deserve emphasis. This was not mere rhetoric typical of ministerial inauguration ceremonies. Indeed, the very next day, May 18, the 'Financial and Securities Crime Joint Investigation Team' was officially established at the Seoul Southern District Prosecutor's Office. The organization was operational just one day after the announcement.

The One Who Dismantled It, The One Who Revived It

We must first examine the history of this organization.

The Joint Securities Crime Investigation Team was created in May 2013 under the Park Geun-hye administration. Initially established at the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office, it was relocated to the Seoul Southern District Prosecutor's Office the following year to improve access to information from the securities industry. Specialized personnel from related agencies such as the Financial Supervisory Service, the National Tax Service, and the Korea Exchange worked alongside prosecutors in a shared office. As the name 'joint investigation' indicated, it was an organization that combined the prosecution's investigative capacity with the financial sector's expertise.

Results came immediately. Within seven months of its launch, it referred 126 cases to trial and recovered 24 billion won in illegal proceeds. In a single year, it handled nearly one hundred cases, earning the nickname 'Yeouido's Grim Reaper.' It was the only permanent investigative agency exclusively handling crimes that corroded the capital market: stock price manipulation, market rigging, insider trading, and irregular disclosures.

Yet this organization disappeared in January 2020. Then-Justice Minister Choo Mi-ae abolished thirteen prosecution investigative divisions, eliminating the Securities Crime Joint Investigation Team among them. The policy was to reduce the prosecution's direct investigative capacity under the banner of 'prosecutor reform.'

What happened after the joint team disappeared? The Lime Asset Management scandal erupted. The Optimus Fund fraud case broke. Allegations of Shinrazen stock price manipulation surfaced. Trillions of won in financial crimes emerged in succession, but the dedicated investigative organization had already been disbanded. Revival of the joint team gained traction, but former Minister Choo drew a line.

Two years and four months passed. During that time, ordinary investors lost hundreds of billions of won to Lime and Optimus. Stock manipulation groups roamed the securities market freely, now that the dedicated investigative organization had vanished.

A Forty-Eight-Member Elite Unit

The organization Han Dong-hoon revived was larger than before. It comprised a total of 48 members: prosecutors and staff from the Financial Supervisory Service and other related agencies. It was larger than the previous joint team of 47 or the investigation cooperation unit that had operated in the interim with 46 members.

Elite personnel from the National Tax Service were dispatched, along with officials from the Financial Services Commission, the Financial Supervisory Service, and the Korea Exchange. The prosecution's power of coercive investigation, the tax service's capacity for fund tracing, the financial authority's expertise in market surveillance, and the exchange's ability to analyze transaction data all converged under one roof.

To understand why this matters, one must grasp the nature of financial crime. Stock manipulators mobilize dozens of nominee accounts. They establish overseas shell companies, construct complex derivative structures, and deceive investors through false disclosures. Investigating such crimes requires experts who understand how financial markets operate, tax specialists who trace fund flows, and data analysts who identify trading patterns, all sitting alongside prosecutors and exchanging information in real time.

It is not that a general prosecution investigative unit cannot do this work. But the difference between an organization with specialized personnel permanently integrated, like the joint team, and the method of sending cooperation letters to various agencies each time a case emerges is like heaven and earth in terms of speed and depth.

The Minister's Will, The Organization's Expansion

Han Dong-hoon did not stop at reviving the joint team. He expanded the specialized joint investigation model that began in the financial and securities sector to other areas.

He established a new National Finance Crime Joint Investigation Team. It is an organization dedicated to handling crimes that eat away at public taxes: subsidy fraud, public procurement corruption, and embezzlement of national budgets.

He also established a Voice Phishing Joint Investigation Team. The joint team installed at the Seoul Eastern District Prosecutor's Office achieved results in five months of operation: it arrested 111 individuals, including 20 leaders of voice phishing organizations and 78 mid-level operatives. Voice phishing is a crime that causes damage in the hundreds of billions of won each year, literally victimizing ordinary people.

Three joint investigation teams now stand side by side. Stock manipulators on Yeouido, financial criminals who siphon government budgets, voice phishing organizations targeting the elderly and young workers. The frontline of 'economic crimes victimizing ordinary people' that Han Dong-hoon mentioned in his inauguration address thus unfolded in three directions.

The Philosophy in His Inauguration Address

It is worth revisiting Han Dong-hoon's inauguration address. He defined it this way: 'True prosecutor reform, true criminal justice system reform, is building a fair system that can conduct rigorous investigations even against the socially powerful.'

His investigative philosophy is compressed in this sentence. At that time, the word 'prosecutor reform' was being used almost synonymously with 'limiting the prosecution's investigative authority' in political circles. Han Dong-hoon directly inverted that frame. He declared that prosecutor reform is not about weakening the prosecution, but about establishing an investigative system that does not waver even before the powerful.

We must not become a society where people are afraid to walk at night, where gangs roam freely, where ordinary people suffer harm yet choose to endure it in silence.

Immediately after these words, the revival of the joint team was announced. The first statement was backed not by abstract values but by concrete action. Strong against the strong, warm toward the weak. The principle he had maintained since his days as a prosecutor was fully evident in the minister's first moves.

What Two Years and Four Months of Vacancy Left Behind

Looking back at what unfolded in South Korea's capital market during the two years and four months when Yeouido's Grim Reaper was absent, one can see how great the cost of dismantling the joint team was.

The Lime Asset Management scandal caused investor losses of approximately 1.6 trillion won. The Optimus Fund fraud made approximately 500 billion won vanish. A substantial portion of this money belonged to middle-aged and older investors who had entrusted their retirement savings, and ordinary investors trying to grow their capital.

Could the joint team have prevented all this damage? We cannot know. But the mere fact that a dedicated investigative organization was monitoring Yeouido would have served as a crime deterrent. Yeouido, once the Grim Reaper departed, was for criminals no different from an empty house.

Han Dong-hoon locked that empty house again. And he did it on his first day in office, in just one day. What a minister can accomplish on the first day of office is ordinarily symbolic. But Han Dong-hoon's first day was not symbolism but execution. Before the ink on his inauguration address had even dried, 48 investigators had taken their places at the Seoul Southern District Prosecutor's Office.

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Chapter 8: 'I Will Risk Everything'

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The Struggle of 1 Against 180: Han Dong-hoon's Years in Parliament

I Will Risk Everything: Han Dong-hoon Wins the Battle of 1 Against 180

1 Cheongdam-dong and One Sentence

In October 2022, at a National Assembly audit. Representative Kim Ui-gyeom of the Democratic Party of Korea leveled allegations against Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon. The claim was that President Yoon Suk-yeol and Han Dong-hoon had attended a drinking gathering with thirty lawyers at a bar in Cheongdam-dong. A YouTube channel released an audio file claiming it was a recording, and the opposition party launched a fierce attack, comparing it to a "second state administration scandal."

Han Dong-hoon said this at that moment: "If I had been at that gathering, or at a similar gathering, or anywhere within a kilometer of it, I would risk everything - including my position as Justice Minister - and any public office I might hold in the future."

"I will risk everything." He had wagered his entire public career. It was not a vague denial or a cautious hedge. It was a single sentence that put his very existence on the line, declaring that he would forfeit everything if he had lied.

What happened next? The cellist himself appeared before police and confessed that it had all been false. Han Dong-hoon said, "When the tide goes out, you can tell who was swimming naked," demanding that the opposition lawmakers who had stirred up the allegations apologize. In court, the cellist testified as a witness, saying, "I have never seen those people in my life."

This episode matters because it reveals Han Dong-hoon's style of fighting. He does not hold back. He puts himself on the line as the stakes and demands that his opponent do the same. His stance found its most dramatic expression in the vote on the arrest warrant motion for Lee Jae-myung.

2 The First Attempt: February 2023, Defeated

February 27, 2023. A vote on an arrest warrant motion for Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the main opposition party, took place in the National Assembly plenary hall. It was unprecedented in constitutional history. The very act of the National Assembly voting on an arrest warrant for the sitting leader of the main opposition party was an event without precedent.

Han Dong-hoon, in his capacity as Justice Minister, took the podium in the National Assembly plenary hall. It was to explain the reasons for the arrest warrant request. The core allegations included irregularities in the development of Wirye and Daejanmyeon-dong, and suspicions regarding sponsorship of Seongnam FC.

But the result was defeat. 138 votes in favor, 138 against, 11 invalid, 9 abstentions. With the votes split evenly and invalid ballots and abstentions combined, it fell short of a majority. The Democratic Party with 168 seats had essentially defeated it as party policy. Criticism of a "body-guard parliament" poured in, but faced with the numbers, Han Dong-hoon had no choice but to withdraw.

Normally, it would have ended there. Bringing up an arrest warrant motion again after it was defeated once carries enormous political risk. If it failed again, the prosecution's credibility would crumble and the Justice Minister's political viability would be damaged.

Han Dong-hoon did not stop.

3 Seven Months of Preparation and a Second Challenge

On September 18, 2023, the prosecution requested an arrest warrant again against Lee Jae-myung. This time, allegations of special favors in the development of Baekhyeon-dong, illegal fund transfers to North Korea, and perjury instigation were added. Over seven months, Han Dong-hoon had urged the investigation team and strengthened the evidence.

On September 21, 2023, the second arrest warrant motion vote took place.

Han Dong-hoon took the podium in the National Assembly plenary hall again. This time was different. For thirty minutes, he laid out Lee Jae-myung's alleged crimes one by one.

"Representative Lee Jae-myung is at the apex of large-scale corruption, and without him, the crimes of the practical workers already in custody make no sense structurally."

Then he recalled a promise Lee Jae-myung himself had made in the National Assembly three months earlier. "Three months ago, on June 19th, Representative Lee Jae-myung stood in this very spot and voluntarily promised the people that he would waive his immunity from arrest regarding political investigations into him." He added: "No one forced that promise. He himself explicitly pledged not to attach conditions about lawful investigations or anything else - there is no room for other interpretation. Now is the time to keep the promise made to the sovereign people."

He had bound Lee Jae-myung with Lee Jae-myung's own words.

4 Thirty Minutes in the Plenary Hall

Throughout the thirty minutes Han Dong-hoon stood at the podium, fierce shouts and protests from the opposition benches never ceased.

"Make it brief," "Why do you keep disclosing things like this," "Why are you being so detailed," "Get down from there," "Stop," "Prosecutor Han Dong-hoon," "This is parliament, not a courtroom." The opposition lawmakers' shouts poured down relentlessly.

The Speaker of the National Assembly requested that he summarize and explain several times over. The opposition demanded he stop speaking, claiming it was a public disclosure of suspected criminal conduct.

Han Dong-hoon did not stop. "Because Representative Lee and the Democratic Party lawmakers are arguing that this matter has no evidence, I have a duty to explain it before the people. I will fulfill that duty."

A massive opposition with 180 seats had formed a wall. In the midst of shouting, jeering, and protest, one person stood at the podium and continued speaking. One against 180. Those thirty minutes made this dynamic most starkly visible.

5 149 Votes: The Drama of a Single Vote's Difference

The vote result was: of 295 members present, 149 in favor, 136 against, 6 abstentions, 4 invalid. It passed.

The threshold for passage is a simple majority of those present, which is 148 votes. 149 was exactly 1 vote above the passage line. Two fewer votes would have meant defeat.

The meaning of this number must be examined. The People Power Party held 111 seats. Even combining pro-government independents and the Justice Party, the total was only 121 seats. For 149 votes to be cast, a minimum of 28 members had to break ranks from the Democratic Party. Analysis showed that at least 21 votes for passage came from the Democratic Party. (29 defections including independents)

The passage of an arrest warrant motion for the leader of the largest party holding a majority of seats was unexpected. It was the first time in constitutional history. Within the Democratic Party itself, doubts had spread about Lee Jae-myung's breaking of his promise to waive immunity and the sincerity of his hunger strike. The thirty-minute explanation Han Dong-hoon poured out from the National Assembly podium, that explanation continued despite the shouting, played a decisive role in producing defections from the Democratic Party.

From 138 votes in February to 149 in September. In seven months, the supporting votes increased by 11. That difference of 11 votes was what separated defeat from passage.

6 What Came After

After the arrest warrant motion passed, Lee Jae-myung attended a substantive warrant review in court. However, the court rejected the arrest warrant. The motion had passed, but it did not result in arrest.

After the warrant was rejected, Han Dong-hoon said, "I believe the prosecution will continue its investigation without wavering," and stated, "21 people have already been arrested in connection with this matter. This is not an overreaching investigation."

One could view it as failure since the warrant was rejected. But in a broader context, the story is different. The passage of an arrest warrant motion against the leader of a massive opposition party holding 168 seats in the National Assembly itself was unprecedented. The fact that 29 defection votes came from within the opposition party marked the first time that dissatisfaction within the party over Lee Jae-myung was revealed through voting.

Through this process, Han Dong-hoon established his brand. A person who does not back down before the wall of a massive opposition. A person who does not leave the podium even in the face of shouting. A person who puts himself on the line to fight. The sentence "I will risk everything" originated as a rebuttal to the allegations about the Cheongdam-dong drinking gathering, yet it became the sentence that defined his political identity.

He does not back down before the powerful. Even when the numbers work against him, he does not abandon principle. When he fails once, he prepares more thoroughly and tries again. What Han Dong-hoon showed in the battle of one against 180 was precisely that.

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Chapter 9: Five Days as Party Chair: Putting Victims First

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The Traces Han Dong-hoon Left Behind on South Korea

The Tmon-WeMakePrice Crisis and Han Dong-hoon's Swift Action

1 The Fifth Day as Party Chair

In July 2024, an unexpected bombshell exploded. Payment settlements for the online shopping platforms Tmon and WeMakePrice had stopped. At first, it seemed like mere discontent from some sellers. Yet within days, the crisis spiraled beyond control.

2 A One-Trillion-Won Domino Effect

The parent company of both platforms was Qoo10, headquartered in Singapore. Qoo10 was diverting funds for its logistics subsidiary's Nasdaq listing while delaying settlement payments owed to sellers. From October 2023 onwards, it gradually extended the settlement cycle, and by July 2024, the money flow had stopped entirely.

The Financial Supervisory Service found that unsettled payments ballooned from 213.4 billion won as of July 25 to 274.5 billion won by July 31, just six days later. Including transactions through June and July, projections suggested the total could reach one trillion won.

Damage spread like dominoes. Small artisans who supplied furniture, small travel agencies that listed travel packages, and small businesses that consigned gift cards all went unpaid. Consumers who had booked travel could neither obtain refunds nor depart. As payment processors and mobile payment companies withdrew from Tmon and WeMakePrice, refunds themselves became impossible. From July 24 onwards, victims began gathering outside the company offices.

In the lobby of WeMakePrice's headquarters in Seoul's Gangnam district, on a midsummer night, a young couple with a child in hand stood waiting. They had paid for a family vacation but could neither depart nor receive a refund. Beside them stood a prospective groom facing the loss of his honeymoon funds, and behind him was a small seller whose millions in supplier payments were frozen, unable to pay employees. Some wept. Others, exhausted, sat on the floor.

3 The First Message: "Victims Come First"

Han Dong-hoon chose the Tmon-WeMakePrice crisis as the subject of his first social media message after being elected party chair. He wrote: "I pledge that we will hold accountable those who bear responsibility and that the party and government will work together to find ways to minimize harm."

A politician's first message upon taking office usually thanks supporters or appeals for party unity. Han Dong-hoon placed victims' stories in that space instead. He looked first not to the party's circumstances but to the people's.

That order mattered. Among dozens of duties as party chair, the first issue he raised was people being deprived of their money. It was not calculation but constitution. From his days as a prosecutor, Han Dong-hoon's gaze had always turned toward victims. When he was Justice Minister, he resolved the "debt torture" suffered by victims of the Inmin Revolutionary Party case in a month; visiting a prison to verify directly the treatment of correctional officers came from the same source. Whenever someone was harmed, he would meet that person first and solve their problem first. That was Han Dong-hoon's way.

4 Government-Party Talks: Changing Structure Instead of Venting Anger

Words were not enough. Han Dong-hoon immediately activated the government-party consultation framework.

On August 6, the government and the People Power Party held a government-party coordination meeting in the National Assembly and announced institutional reform measures and victim relief plans related to the Tmon-WeMakePrice crisis. It had been only two weeks since taking office.

The core of the measures was threefold.

First, shortening settlement periods. E-commerce firms and electronic payment gateway operators agreed to drastically shorten settlement timelines from the current forty to sixty days. The intent was to change the structure itself that allowed platforms to hold sellers' money for dozens of days.

Second, adopting an escrow system. Rather than having the platform directly handle sale proceeds, a trusted third party such as a bank would hold payment funds and remit them to sellers only after goods were delivered. Rather than relying on the platform operator's conscience, the goal was to build a structure where no one could touch the funds in the first place.

Third, tightening regulation of payment gateway operators. The plan was to raise registration requirements and management standards for payment gateway operators and provide legal grounds for sanctions against those failing to comply.

Why Han Dong-hoon pushed these measures was clear. The young couple sitting in the WeMakePrice lobby in tears, the small business owner who had missed payday for employees, the engaged couple who had to abandon their honeymoon. The same thing could not happen again. Anyone can offer words of comfort to victims. Only those with power can tear apart and remake the system so the same harm is not repeated.

5 Gaps in Regulation and the Tears of the Vulnerable

This crisis revealed a shocking fact. Companies like Coupang that directly buy and sell goods are required by the Large Retail Trade Act to settle accounts within forty to sixty days, but open

marketplaces like Tmon and WeMakePrice were classified as "telecommunications sales brokers" with no regulations whatsoever on settlement cycles.

The law had gaps. Those gaps poured out hundreds of billions of won in damages.

Han Dong-hoon followed the same pattern when he was Justice Minister. Creating a joint voice phishing task force, pushing to strengthen stalking prevention laws, promoting Jessica's Law, all were efforts to fill gaps in the system where the vulnerable were harmed but the law had not kept pace. Beyond catching perpetrators after crimes occurred, the goal was to build structures where the same crimes could not happen again. That was what Han Dong-hoon meant by "law for the vulnerable."

6 The Man Who Promised to Liquidate Assets, the Man Who Saw Victims First

Koo Young-bae, CEO of Qoo10, said he would "liquidate personal assets to resolve this." The next day, he filed for corporate rehabilitation. Ryu Hwa-hyun, CEO of WeMakePrice, said she would "focus first on customer refunds." Refunds never came. The words of platform operators scattered into thin air.

Han Dong-hoon made a different kind of promise. "I will hold accountable those who bear responsibility." Prosecutors raided CEO Koo Young-bae's residence and the headquarters of Tmon and WeMakePrice. "I will find ways to minimize harm." The government injected emergency management stabilization funds to small business owners, and comprehensive recurrence prevention measures emerged through government-party coordination.

Koo Young-bae saw himself first in the face of his company's crisis. Han Dong-hoon saw victims first in the face of others' crises. Five days into his role as party chair, at a moment when entrenching his political position could have come first, Han Dong-hoon stood with the people who sat weeping in the company lobby.

That is strong-strong weak-weak. Firm with the strong, warm with the weak. Holding platform operators accountable is strong-strong; filling systemic gaps for harmed consumers and struggling sellers is weak-weak. In his first test as party chair, Han Dong-hoon proved once again the principle he had upheld since his days as a prosecutor.

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Chapter 10: Acknowledging the State's Wrongs

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Addressing the People's Revolutionary Party Debt Ordeal and Pursuing Retrial in the Jeju 4.3 Incident

Acknowledging State Wrongs and Providing Victim Relief, People's Revolutionary Party and 4.3 Incident (2022-2023) Han Dong-hoon pushed for resolution of the People's Revolutionary Party torture case and ex officio retrial in the Jeju 4.3 Incident. Under the principle that "partisan logic and political logic must be set aside, and only the grievances of individual citizens should be considered," it represented an unprecedented move by a conservative administration to provide relief to victims of historical injustices.

The Debt the State Incurred, The Debt the State Must Repay. Han Dong-hoon Resolves the Grievances of the People's Revolutionary Party and the Jeju 4.3 Incident

1 A Nation Demanding an 84-Year-Old Man Return 1.5 Billion Won

There was a man named Lee Chang-bok. In 2022, he was 84 years old. During the Yusin authoritarian period in 1974, he was imprisoned in connection with the People's Revolutionary Party Reconstruction Committee Incident, the second People's Revolutionary Party case. He was accused of receiving orders from North Korea and attempting to overthrow the state. That accusation was false. The People's Revolutionary Party incident is a representative case of fabricated spy charges; victims were subjected to beatings, torture, and other brutal treatment and were imprisoned for extended periods.

Time passed. In 2008, 76 victims were acquitted in a retrial. Subsequently, they filed damage claims lawsuits against the state, and according to first and second instance judgments, they received provisional compensation in 2009. The state acknowledged its wrongdoing and returned the money to the victims. Up to this point, this is a story of justice working as it should.

However, something strange happened. Two years later, in 2011, the Supreme Court ruled that "the calculation of interest on compensation was incorrect" and ordered the return of approximately 500 million won, half the compensation amount. When the Supreme Court changed its precedent regarding the reference point for calculating interest, a portion of the already-paid compensation became an overpayment.

Mr. Lee Chang-bok used the compensation he received to contribute to the establishment of the Peace Foundation and purchased a countryside house where he could spend his remaining years. He was in no position to repay 500 million won. The National Intelligence Service filed a lawsuit

against Mr. Lee, and in 2017 applied for forced execution against his home.

Interest accumulated on the 500 million won he could not repay. Interest of 960 million won accumulated on the principal of 500 million won. The situation became one where he had received 1.09 billion won from the state but now had to repay 1.5 billion won.

A man who had been falsely accused of being a spy and imprisoned, who was acquitted and received compensation, became burdened with a debt greater than the money he had received because precedent changed. The state was operating like a loan shark, collecting interest. People called this "debt ordeal."

2 The Minister Who Saw the Report on His First Day of Work

May 18, 2022. The day Han Dong-hoon took office as Minister of Justice. Among the reports submitted that day was this case. The Seoul High Court had recommended settlement between the government and Mr. Lee Chang-bok, but the Ministry of Justice had rejected the first settlement recommendation during former Minister Park Beom-gye's tenure, and as of May 18, shortly after the Yoon Seok-yeol administration's launch, had rejected the second settlement recommendation as well.

Han Dong-hoon saw this report and recognized the problem. A month later, he changed his position.

On June 20, 2022, at Minister Han Dong-hoon's direction, a "meeting of related agencies regarding recovery of overpaid state compensation" was held with the Seoul High Prosecutor's Office and the National Intelligence Service. They decided to waive approximately 960 million won in delayed interest on the excess compensation Mr. Lee Chang-bok owed to the state and allow him to pay only the principal of 500 million won in installments.

Minister Han Dong-hoon said the following before reporters that day: "From the perspective of common sense held by the public, I thought it was unfair, and I believed it was an area where a responsible official could make a responsible decision. I only considered the grievances of individual citizens and believed that partisan logic and political logic should be set aside."

It is necessary to weigh the significance of this statement. The People's Revolutionary Party incident is one of the most acute symbols of factional conflict in modern Korean history. The progressive camp views it as a representative case of human rights violations under the Yusin regime, while some in the conservative camp interpret it as an unavoidable measure from a national security perspective. For a justice minister from a conservative administration to stand with the victims of this incident was not a politically easy choice.

Han Dong-hoon did not venture into the factional dispute. "The Ministry of Justice made this decision through deep deliberation with the National Intelligence Service, which serves as the litigation agency, and will strive to resolve the public's grievances solely from the perspective of facts, common sense, and justice," he added.

His logic was not ideology but arithmetic. "Due to the exceptional circumstance of a precedent change following provisional payment, a process of 'give then take back' occurred, and when the state compensation to be received is 600 million won but the amount to be repaid becomes 1.5 billion won, leaving this as is would result in injustice to the citizen in question." It was a structure that anyone could see was unfair.

3 Changing Not One Person but the System Itself

After resolving the problem of Mr. Lee Chang-bok alone, Han Dong-hoon did not stop.

In August 2022, he applied the same measures to two other victims of the People's Revolutionary Party incident, the bereaved families of the late Jeon Jae-gwon and Jung Man-jin. He exempted 890 million won and 370 million won in delayed interest respectively and had them pay only the principal in installments. Regarding these measures, Han Dong-hoon said, "Following Mr. Lee Chang-bok in June, this measure represents an effort to transcend partisan logic, care for people's livelihoods, and fulfill the state's duty to resolve the public's grievances."

Of the 49 billion won in compensation for 77 People's Revolutionary Party victims, 21.1 billion won was reduced, and 39 people faced the situation of having to bear greater interest than the money they had received. Simply exempting interest for one or two victims could not be a fundamental solution. The structure itself, in which one had to wait for each individual case to receive settlement recommendations from the court, was the problem.

Lee Song-woo, a poet and son of victim Lee Chang-bok, expressed complex feelings about the end of his father's debt ordeal. "It seemed like the Moon Jae-in administration, which called itself the Candlelight government, would resolve the problem. But did they not leave office having done things far removed from the inaugural address that promised to 'wipe away the sad tears of the people'?" Mr. Lee Chang-bok himself said this: "The Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations committed grave wrongs against us. The Moon Jae-in administration did not resolve this, and now a conservative administration has finally resolved the problem, so I suppose you could call it half a success."

A conservative administration minister untangled a knot that a progressive administration had failed to untangle. That minister did not invoke progressivism or conservatism. The only basis was that there were aggrieved citizens who needed relief.

4 The State Kneels Before 70 Years of Grievance: Ex Officio Retrial in the Jeju 4.3 Incident

Han Dong-hoon's efforts to provide relief for historical injustices did not stop with the People's Revolutionary Party. Three months into his tenure, in August 2022, he turned his attention to the Jeju 4.3 Incident.

The Jeju 4.3 Incident is an event in which tens of thousands of residents were killed during armed conflict and suppression that occurred on Jeju Island from 1947 to 1954. In this process, thousands of residents, despite their innocence, were unjustly imprisoned after being tried for offenses such as

rebellion and violations of the National Defense Law.

In accordance with the revised 4.3 Special Act of February 2022, the prosecution became able to petition ex officio for retrial for those imprisoned in military courts. A joint task force for ex officio retrial of the Jeju 4.3 Incident was established under the Gwangju High Prosecutor's Office, and ex officio retrial was petitioned for 340 people imprisoned in military courts, of which 250 received acquittals from the courts.

However, there was a problem. The retrial subjects explicitly specified in the law were only those imprisoned in military courts. Approximately 1,500 individuals who underwent civilian trials were excluded from this benefit. Although they were imprisoned unjustly due to the same incident, those who underwent military trials received state assistance, while those who underwent civilian trials had to bear the costs themselves to petition for retrial.

A family involved with the Jeju 4.3 Residents' Alliance experienced that contradiction firsthand. Mr. Kang Chul-hun, who resided in Yusugam-ri, Aewol-eup, Jeju City, saw both his father and mother tried during the Jeju 4.3 Incident, taken away, and never return to Jeju. His mother underwent military trial and his father underwent civilian trial. Through ex officio retrial, his mother had her innocence recognized, but his father's case remained indefinitely delayed.

Han Dong-hoon instructed that this gap be closed. "Beyond the 'military courts' specified in the 4.3 Special Act, there is a great need to restore the honor of and provide relief to those imprisoned after civilian trials and their bereaved families. Going forward, I want measures to be prepared to expand ex officio retrial petitions to those imprisoned after civilian trials not specified in the 4.3 Special Act."

This was an instruction that went beyond the scope specified in the law. Han Dong-hoon explained this by saying, "Previous administrations did not expand the ex officio retrial work to civilian trial victims of 4.3 because it required much effort." While military courts had prisoner rosters, civilian trials required an exhaustive investigation of individual judgments, making analysis difficult. If it was something left undone because it required much work, then it should be done even if it requires much work, that was Han Dong-hoon's judgment.

Related Jeju 4.3 organizations unanimously expressed support. The Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation said, "This measure will serve as a breakthrough for restoring the honor of civilian trial victims," and the Jeju 4.3 Institute evaluated it as "an opportunity to take another step toward a just resolution of the Jeju 4.3 issue."

Kyunghyang Shinmun reported on this measure as "a 'non-partisan' move following the decision to exempt People's Revolutionary Party victims from interest payments."

5 Why Did a Minister From a Conservative Administration Do This?

It is necessary to raise a question. The People's Revolutionary Party incident was a wrongdoing of the Park Chung-hee regime. The Jeju 4.3 Incident was a tragedy in early South Korea. Providing relief to victims of these two incidents has traditionally been seen as the responsibility of the

progressive camp. When progressive administrations took office, they promised to resolve these issues and achieved partial success, but the People's Revolutionary Party debt burden and the 4.3 civilian trial victim problem ultimately went unresolved.

Han Dong-hoon did not view this work as a "progressive task." He viewed it as a "state wrongdoing." Wrongs committed by the state must be corrected by any administration. There is no reason for a conservative administration to turn a blind eye to a conservative administration's past wrongs. Rather, when a conservative administration itself acknowledges and corrects past mistakes, that action carries greater weight.

During a July 2023 visit to Jeju to inspect the work of the joint task force, Han Dong-hoon said: "Justice is based on the judicial system. Ex officio retrial for matters from over 70 years ago is unprecedented worldwide, but by current standards, injustice must be resolved within our judicial system for it to have legitimacy. Our government will do its best without tiring until the end."

The phrase "without tiring until the end" weighs on my mind. Finding and analyzing judgment documents from an incident 70 years old one page at a time, confirming survivors, meeting bereaved families, and petitioning for retrial are tasks whose results are not quickly visible. These are not matters that generate political credit. That is why previous administrations had postponed them, citing the reason that "they required much effort."

Han Dong-hoon did this work. For the People's Revolutionary Party, he ended the debt ordeal, and for the Jeju 4.3, he broadened the door for ex officio retrial. Both decisions were ones that could make his conservative political base uncomfortable. He accepted that discomfort. The statement that "partisan logic and political logic have no place in resolving the public's grievances" was not rhetoric but a principle backed by actual administrative decisions.

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Chapter 11: Laws for the Vulnerable: Seeing Those Unseen

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Traces Han Dong-hoon Left on South Korea

Mandela Boys' School and the Improvement of Correctional Officer Treatment

Han Dong-hoon and Mandela Boys' School

In 2022, Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon issued a directive: build a school for juvenile inmates inside Seoul Southern Prison.

Until then, South Korea had only one juvenile prison dedicated solely to minors: the Gumi Boys' Prison in North Gyeongbuk. There were roughly 300 juveniles under 18 with finalized sentences across the country, most of whom had entered prison before finishing their schooling. When their education was interrupted during their incarceration, they carried the stigma of being uneducated after release, and that stigma often led back to crime in a vicious cycle that kept repeating itself.

Han Dong-hoon wanted to break this chain.

In March 2023, Mandela Boys' School officially opened inside Seoul Southern Prison in Guro-gu. The name was taken from Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, a man who continued his studies despite poverty and discrimination to become a lawyer, and ultimately reached the presidency. His words became the school's motto: "The greatest glory in life is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."

Mandela Boys' School is the nation's only dedicated correctional education facility for juveniles, serving inmates under 18 with finalized sentences. Its purpose is not merely to confine inmates, but to build their potential for social reintegration through tailored education, including GED preparation and college entrance preparation.

The sight of boys in blue prison uniforms staring at the blackboard and moving pens in their hands was not so different from any ordinary high school. Correctional officers taught English directly, and college student volunteers conducted classes in Korean and mathematics. Children who had struggled with the alphabet passed the GED exam, and those who initially resisted even writing letters of reflection for their victims underwent transformation through the rehabilitation process.

In November 2023, for the first time ever, a national college entrance exam testing center was set up inside a prison. At this center, named "Seoul Guro District Zone 13 Test Center 6," ten juvenile inmates who had passed the GED examination took the national college entrance exam. The Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education covered all testing fees.

The Social Reintegration Department head who served as principal of Mandela Boys' School said, "In 33 years and 9 months of service, the most rewarding moments came when I saw the children transforming as we operated Mandela School," and added, "I saw them studying by themselves even at 1 a.m., asking each other English vocabulary questions and answering them."

Beginning with a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Justice's Correctional Bureau and the Gratitude and Sharing Research Institute in October 2022, Mandela Boys' School also conducted gratitude education. Six juvenile inmates who attended the first session remembered the instructors during the second session and greeted them first, and the students went on to create gratitude slogans by team and build rapport through praise and encouragement. Instruction in violin and other arts, physical education, and performance arts was provided by outside specialists who visited weekly, with all trainees required to participate. Victim empathy education was held twice yearly on a regular basis, and in-depth psychological counseling was offered when needed.

Though they committed crimes, these are still children not yet seventeen. What they needed was not confinement, but an opportunity to rise again. When Han Dong-hoon spoke of "strong with the strong, weak with the weak," it was not only "strong with the strong." The second part, "weak with the weak," was embodied in Mandela Boys' School. It means wielding the investigation blade without mercy against the illegal acts of conglomerate chiefs, yet opening the classroom door so that a fallen boy can rise again. These are the two legacies Han Dong-hoon left as Justice Minister.

A Ministry of Justice official stated, "What juvenile inmates need is not mere punishment but preparation to return to society," and added, "Mandela Boys' School is a new model that can realize that possibility, and a form of youth education under state responsibility."

Allowances Frozen for Sixteen Years, Duty Rooms Without Beds: Han Dong-hoon, Seeing the Unseen

1 A Place No One Visits

There are people who work in prisons. Correctional officers. Even their title is stiff. The work itself is stiffer still. They face murderers, sex offenders, drug traffickers, and organized crime members every day. They work night shifts at dawn, physically restrain rioting inmates, prevent escapes, and stop self-harm. They hold a job that guards the most dangerous people in South Korea from closest proximity.

Yet no one looked after these people.

The custody allowance for correctional officers dealing with inmates had been frozen for sixteen years since 2006. 170,000 won per month. In effect, they earned roughly 5,000 won per day as payment for working night shifts right beside murderers. The health checkup allowance for night shift workers was 30,000 won. With 30,000 won, you cannot properly conduct even a single blood test.

The night duty rooms had no beds. Correctional officers who needed to grab a few hours of sleep during their night shift slept on hard floors. Some quarters had no refrigerators. Correctional officers

working inmate custody on the exercise yard were exposed directly to summer heat waves and winter freezes. There were not even break rooms where they could take shelter.

How did this happen? Han Dong-hoon diagnosed it this way: "While we spoke of the serious hardship faced by field correctional officials, when it actually came to budgeting, they were always pushed aside by louder, more powerful departments and never once made a priority. As a result, it was always 'let's do it next time.'"

These four words, "let's do it next time," repeated for sixteen years. Within the Ministry of Justice, correctional officers were a presence hidden behind prosecutors. Although about half of all Ministry staff were correctional officers, when securing budgets, the prosecution side came first, and the correctional side was always relegated to the back.

2 His First Field Visit: The Prison

June 10, 2022. Where Han Dong-hoon chose to make his first policy field visit after taking office as Justice Minister revealed his priorities. It was not the National Assembly, nor the Supreme Prosecutors' Office, nor any prestigious institution in Seoul. It was Cheongju Prison in North Chungcheong.

It was unprecedented for a minister to visit a prison as their first stop. Prisons are not places ministers typically choose to visit. There are no media cameras following, no flashy achievement announcements, no citizens cheering. He went there to listen to the stories of people working quietly behind high walls.

At the site, Han Dong-hoon said, "Improving the treatment of correctional officers is not about civil servant welfare, but about laying the foundation for guaranteeing inmate rights and conducting sophisticated correctional work."

It is worth examining the logic behind these words. What happens when correctional officers are treated poorly? Exhausted and demoralised officers cannot manage inmates properly. Violence spreads among inmates, correctional order breaks down, and rehabilitation programs become merely formal. Ultimately, the recidivism rate of released prisoners rises, and the damage returns directly to the public. Improving the treatment of correctional officers is a matter directly tied to public safety.

3 Promise and Fulfillment

In August 2022, when one hundred days had passed since his inauguration, Han Dong-hoon sent a direct email to correctional officers across the nation. It contained the message, "I will do my best so that correctional officers can work with pride and honor." It was unprecedented for a minister to send email directly to individual field correctional officers.

And the promise was fulfilled with numbers.

In the 2023 government budget proposal, the budget for improving correctional officer treatment was increased by 37.1% compared to the previous year. The total amount of 18.6 billion won represented

an increase of more than 5 billion won from the previous year's 13.5 billion won.

Looking at the specific details reveals how comprehensive these measures were. The number of recipients of special duty allowances was expanded from 980 to 1,430 people. Previously, the allowance had been paid to only 66.9% of eligible recipients, creating fairness issues among the remaining staff, and this was now resolved.

Food expenses for correctional officers were increased by 1.095 billion won. Recognizing the frequent physical exertion required in their work, such as restraining rioting inmates, the daily meal rate applicable to military personnel was applied.

The mental health recovery support budget was allocated at 1.538 billion won, an increase of 691 million won. The psychological exhaustion experienced by correctional officers who face criminals daily is beyond imagination. For those suffering from post-traumatic stress, depression, and burnout while unable to attend to their mental health under the pressure to remain "strong," the state finally extended its hand.

To protect yard patrol officers from extreme heat and cold, 151 break rooms were newly installed, and 1.388 billion won was allocated to renovate the emergency standby facilities at Hongseong Prison, which had been built in 1974.

Beds were installed in night duty rooms that previously had none, and refrigerators were provided to all staff quarters. Printers and internet access were installed in each cellblock for correctional officers, and an additional duty allowance was created for staff working in the punishment blocks, where the workload is particularly demanding.

A bed, a refrigerator. Nothing remarkable. Yet the fact that they lacked even this, and that it took the Justice Minister's direct directive to provide it, is bittersweet.

4 Tearing Up a Thirty-Eight-Year-Old 'Etiquette Code'

What Han Dong-hoon changed was not just the budget. He addressed the very culture of the correctional organization.

Among correctional officers, there existed an "Etiquette Code for Correctional Officers" created in 1985. This code, comprising 3 chapters and 17 articles, contained the following requirements: subordinates had to address their superiors with the honorific suffix, and when accompanying a superior, had to follow one step behind or to the left. Handshakes were only permitted when initiated by the superior, and had to be offered from one step away while standing at attention with the right hand.

A regulation maintained for thirty-eight years. In a civil service organization, not the military, subordinates had to walk one step behind their superiors. Upon learning of this code's contents, Han Dong-hoon immediately ordered its abolishment.

In the directive abolishing the code, the Ministry of Justice stated, "Contrary to the original intent of fostering mutual respect between superiors and subordinates, there is concern it may be misused as justification for workplace power abuse," and noted that "it compels respect and creates a rigid organizational culture." The very fact that phrases like "justification for power abuse" and "compulsory respect" appeared in an official directive was unprecedented.

The anti-authoritarian principle Han Dong-hoon practiced from his inauguration had seeped into every corner of the corrections organization. This decision came from the person who instructed executives, including ministers and vice ministers, not to use the honorific suffix 'nim' when addressing them, and who banned the protocol of staff opening and closing the official car doors during commute times.

5 Electronic Monitoring: Using Technology to Ease Public Anxiety

Along with improving the treatment of correctional officers, the other pillar Han Dong-hoon drove forward was the refinement of the electronic monitoring system.

In October 2022, as the release date of child sex offender Kim Geun-sik approached, public anxiety reached a peak. Han Dong-hoon personally visited the Ministry of Justice's Location Tracking Central Control Center in Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, and the Seoul Probation Office. He inspected the operational status of the electronic monitoring system and reviewed the behavioral observation situation regarding high-risk monitoring targets.

At that moment, Han Dong-hoon said this: "Criminals exist in every country, but managing things so that citizens do not feel anxious is both a nation's capacity and its national dignity."

National dignity. It means the character and standing of a nation. The existence of criminals is an inescapable reality. But managing things so that citizens can live at peace even after a criminal is released, that is the measure that shows a nation's level.

Work followed to improve the performance of electronic monitors, refine the control system, and strengthen the personnel of the rapid investigation team that manages monitoring targets around the clock. Coordinated with the promotion of the Korean version of Jessica's Law, it was part of a larger plan to build infrastructure to track and monitor high-risk sex offenders released from prison without gaps.

6 To Those Who Walked One Step Behind

On March 31, 2023, the swearing-in ceremony for the 81st class of 7th-rank correctional officers was held at the Legal Research and Training Institute in Jincheon, North Chungcheong Province. The day when correctional staff completed their training course and received their rank insignia for the first time. Han Dong-hoon appeared at this ceremony. It was the first time the Minister of Justice had attended a correctional officers' swearing-in ceremony since Jincheon Headquarters was established.

Han Dong-hoon pinned a rank insignia on each graduate and shook hands with them. He didn't skip anyone. To people standing at the very bottom of an organization that had been forced for 38 years to

follow 'one step behind your superior,' the person at the very top of the organization extended his hand first.

The coverage in the Legal Times reporting reactions among correctional officers was striking. "Considerable change has been made compared to the previous minister's tenure." In online communities where correctional officers typically gather, posts welcoming the Ministry of Justice's policies appeared, with people saying Han Dong-hoon had kept his promise.

Raising allowances frozen for 16 years, placing a bed in the duty room, putting a refrigerator in the dormitory, setting up a break room on the playing field during extreme heat, abolishing a 38-year-old rule of mistreatment, writing emails directly to all correctional officers nationwide, attending the swearing-in ceremony and shaking hands with each person. None of these were grand undertakings.

But because these were not grand undertakings, they touch the heart even more. All of these are things that should have existed as a matter of course. You need a bed to sleep, a refrigerator to store food, and health checkups to find what ails you. The fact that basic things were absent, and that it took a minister's decision to make the obvious obvious, that fact speaks to how long the profession of correctional officer had been neglected.

Han Dong-hoon sent a video message to children held in juvenile detention centers, saying this: "Apologizing to victims and reflecting on your actions matter more than studying, and I ask you never to forget that."

Strong against the strong, warm to the weak. That principle doesn't apply only when detaining a corporate tycoon. It works just the same whether placing a bed in the duty room of a correctional officer working quietly behind prison walls, or in a video message saying 'reflection comes first' to a child in a juvenile detention center.

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Chapter 12: Reimagining the Nation's Structure

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The Immigration Service Establishment, Creation of the International Legal Affairs Division, and Espionage Law Revision

Han Dong-hoon Considers the Immigration Service Establishment and South Korea's National Structure

In May 2022, upon taking office as Minister of Justice, Han Dong-hoon made an unexpected remark in his inaugural address. "I will put in place a system to advance immigration policy at a high level, including consideration of establishing an Immigration Service."

It was the first time a Minister of Justice had raised the subject of immigration in an inaugural address. Typically, a newly appointed Minister of Justice speaks first of prosecutorial reform or establishing legal order. But Han Dong-hoon posed a more fundamental question: whether South Korea as a nation could continue to exist in the future.

The numbers he observed were stark. South Korea's total fertility rate was 0.7 children. It was the lowest figure in the world. According to a report by the Korea Institute for Future Population Research, the working-age population would shrink by 10 million people compared to now within twenty years. The disappearance of 10 million workers would mean factories shutting down, hospitals closing, military strength diminishing, and pension funds running dry. Han Dong-hoon declared unequivocally, "Multifaceted and structural population decline cannot be addressed by policies aimed at recovery of fertility rates alone. The moment for action has already passed."

This did not mean abandoning policies to encourage childbirth. The idea was to continue fertility incentives while filling the gaps that these measures alone could not address through immigration. "There is no advanced nation without an immigration policy. If we miss this window of opportunity, ten years from now we will face blame and regret for failing to act then."

Han Dong-hoon's survey of the world made one thing clear. Australia was accepting immigrants under the banner "Without population growth, we perish." Canada announced a plan to accept over 1.5 million immigrants and adopted an online immigration application system that expedited the issuance of permanent residence permits. Even the United States, through the Brookings Institution, released a report stating that "the development of rational immigration policy is a means of restoring a nation to health." The world's advanced nations were already treating immigration as a matter of national survival. South Korea alone remained idle.

The problem was that immigration-related functions in South Korea were scattered across multiple ministries. Entry and exit was handled by the Ministry of Justice, foreign workers by the Ministry of Employment and Labor, multicultural family support by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family,

and social integration by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety. It was like five doctors treating a single patient without consulting one another. While a Foreign Policy Committee headed by the Prime Minister was supposed to coordinate these matters, it had no budget allocation authority and lacked real power to carry out its role effectively.

Han Dong-hoon set out to change this structure.

The core strategy was to establish an Immigration Service under the Minister of Justice and consolidate immigration affairs scattered across forty-two laws under a single director of immigration. This structure would enable the Immigration Service to assume all immigration-related functions, including entry and exit control and residence management, nationality, refugees, and foreign resident social integration.

Han Dong-hoon particularly emphasized the principle that "flexible immigration requires strict residence management." The point was to open doors, but not to everyone. He said, "Korea is a semiconductor and IT powerhouse, but superior IT talent doesn't come here because of a lack of predictability. We will treat capable and vetted individuals with exceptional consideration." The idea was to open doors quickly for high-skilled workers while maintaining strict order against illegal residence. He also promised a system to exceptionally facilitate residence qualification conversions for skilled foreign workers recommended by companies.

When meeting with the governor of Jeollanam Province, Han Dong-hoon directly raised the crisis of regional depopulation, noting, "Jeollanam Province maintained a population of over two million until 2004, but it has declined to 1.81 million as of last year." They also discussed region-tailored policies including visa-waiver provisions at Muan Airport, securing foreign workers for shipbuilding, and expanding the seasonal foreign worker program. The governor responded, "An Immigration Service is absolutely necessary to implement systematic foreign worker policy."

Han Dong-hoon saw immigration policy as a matter of national importance comparable to land reform. Just as land reform in the 1950s laid the economic foundation for South Korea, his vision was that immigration reform would serve as a pillar supporting the nation's future in an age of demographic cliffs.

Yet this policy did not proceed smoothly.

Immigration Service establishment was actually a policy that the Democratic Party had pledged four years earlier in its general election platform. Yet when Minister of Justice Han Dong-hoon advanced it, the Democratic Party reversed course. It was a typical scene from Yeouido, where the same policy becomes good or bad depending on who advocates it.

In February 2024, an amendment to the Government Organization Act containing the Immigration Service establishment was submitted to the National Assembly. It was a bill that had been coordinated among relevant ministries, centered on the Ministry of Justice, including the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, the Ministry of Employment and Labor, and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. Yet the ruling party, the People Power Party, was passive, and the major opposition

Democratic Party was indifferent. After Han Dong-hoon left the Ministry of Justice and entered politics, and following the ruling party's decisive defeat in the general election, the Immigration Service bill drifted without even passing a standing committee of the National Assembly.

An editorial assessment stated: "Immigration reform that relied solely on the individual capacity of Han Dong-hoon amid ministerial silos and political indifference was a predictable limitation. No one takes responsibility, and there is no ministry to follow up. If things end this way, we lose another five years, and that burden will simply transfer to future generations."

Han Dong-hoon's push for the Immigration Service was not simply about admitting more foreigners. It was about reconsidering the structure of South Korea itself. In a nation where children are not being born, where workers are disappearing, where regions are emptying out, how can this nation continue to the next generation? The question posed by this former prosecutor turned Minister of Justice transcended the scope of legal administration and touched upon national design.

The Immigration Service has not yet been established. Yet the fact that local governments such as Gyeonggi Province, Gyeongbuk Province, and North and South Chungcheong Province are competing to attract its location shows that the question Han Dong-hoon raised remains alive. Facing the time bomb of demographic decline, someone must inevitably raise this issue again. Han Dong-hoon was the first to do so.

The Espionage Law Han Dong-hoon Changed: A Revision After 73 Years and Its Full Account

1 The Gap in an Outdated Law

Article 98 of South Korea's Criminal Code was created in 1953, shortly after the Korean War. The essence of the statute reads as follows.

"A person who commits espionage for an enemy nation or aids such espionage shall be punished by death, life imprisonment, or imprisonment of seven years or more."

Here, "enemy nation" refers, according to Supreme Court precedent, only to North Korea. It is a law written for a time seventy years ago when North Korea alone was the threat.

The problem is that the world has changed. There are people passing semiconductor design blueprints to Chinese companies. There are people collecting military intelligence for Russia. There are people secretly photographing American aircraft carriers and posting them on foreign social media. Yet these people cannot be charged with espionage. This is because the "enemy nation" specified in law refers only to North Korea.

Of course, it was not entirely impossible to pursue punishment under other laws. One could invoke the Military Secrets Protection Act, the Industrial Technology Protection Act, the Civil Service Act, and others. But the statutory penalty under the Industrial Technology Protection Act was imprisonment of fifteen years or less, far lighter than espionage, which could carry the death penalty. The situation required treating a person who sold the nation's most confidential secrets to a foreign power not as a

"spy" but merely as someone guilty of unauthorized disclosure.

2 A Spy Yet No Espionage Charge: The National Intelligence Service Secrets Leak Case

There is an incident that exposed this legal gap most starkly.

In July 2024, it was revealed that a military civilian employee, Mr. A, from the Defense Intelligence Command had handed over classified military secrets, including the real names and personal details of "black operatives" conducting covert operations overseas and information about front companies, to Chinese intelligence officers. Mr. A was recruited by individuals presumed to be Chinese intelligence operatives at Yanji Airport in China in 2017. Over the following seven years, he systematically leaked classified information and received approximately 160 million won into shell accounts in return.

By any measure, this was espionage. Yet the military prosecutor applied not espionage charges but a general offense of betraying the state against Mr. A. The reasoning was that the leaked classified information went to Chinese intelligence, not to North Korea, the "enemy nation."

That same year, an incident occurred in which a Chinese exchange student photographed an American aircraft carrier docked at Busan Naval Base and the Suwon Air Force Base without authorization, then posted them on Chinese social media. This too could not be prosecuted as espionage.

In short, the situation was this: pass military secrets to North Korea and you are a spy; pass them to China and you are not. It was a structure utterly incomprehensible by any reasonable standard.

3 Han Dong-hoon Speaks Up First

Among high-profile politicians, Han Dong-hoon was the first to actively raise and publicize the issue of expanding espionage law.

Han Dong-hoon raised this issue beginning when he was Minister of Justice. Even during his tenure as Minister and later as interim chair of the People Power Party, he demonstrated strong commitment to revising the law, and he emphasized that it should be prioritized for passage if the People Power Party won the general election.

After being elected party leader in July 2024, he elevated espionage law revision to official party position. When the Defense Intelligence Command secrets leak case broke, Han Dong-hoon posted on social media: "Chinese nationals and others leaked classified files of Republic of Korea intelligence operatives. Absurdly, our country cannot prosecute them for espionage. Our espionage law targets only North Korea, which we designate as an enemy nation."

In August, speaking at a legislative forum held in the National Assembly, he said: "No country in the world limits espionage prosecution to a single enemy nation. We must change 'enemy nation' to 'foreign country' in the espionage statute."

Han Dong-hoon's argument can be summarized in three points.

First, espionage is not solely a North Korean problem. If spies from any country, China, Russia, or elsewhere, target our state secrets, they must be treated as spies. Second, other nations already do this. The United States has expanded application of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA); Britain adopted a National Security Act in 2023; and China revised its espionage law in 2023 to broaden the scope of penalties. Third, this is not simply about intensifying punishment but about protecting national interests and the safety of the people. Han Dong-hoon defined this as "not a matter of expanding penal statutes but a question of national interests and the people, and a philosophical matter concerning how we understand our position within the global order."

4 Opposition and Ruling Party Debate and the Long Legislative Process

How did the opposition respond to Han Dong-hoon's argument?

There was broad consensus between the ruling and opposition parties on the direction of broadening the scope of espionage charges. The Democratic Party also put forward amendments through lawmakers including Jang Gyeong-tae, Kang Yu-jeong, Park Sun-won, and Wi Seong-rak. However, disagreement emerged over specific details.

The opposition's concerns were primarily twofold. First, there was worry that the scope of "state secrets" as defined in law was excessively broad. The Supreme Court precedent held that "even minor matters, if disclosed, could be deemed state secrets if there is manifest risk of benefiting a foreign nation and harming the Republic of Korea," raising concern that ordinary citizens engaged in exchanges with foreigners could become subjects of espionage investigations. Second, there was concern that the scope of domestic surveillance by the National Intelligence Service could expand again.

The legislative process was fraught with obstacles. While it passed the subcommittee of the National Assembly's Judiciary Committee on November 13, 2024, the Democratic Party subsequently did not attend the full committee meeting, citing the need for public hearings, which delayed proceedings. Then, with the emergency martial law incident breaking out on December 3, all legislative discussions came to a standstill.

In November 2025, Justice Minister Jeong Seong-ho reaffirmed the intention to amend the law, reopening discussions. On December 3, 2025, the amendments to the espionage statute passed in the full Judiciary Committee meeting. The fact that the amendments were even brought to the full committee as an agenda item was unprecedented in constitutional history.

5 First Revision in 73 Years, February 26, 2026

On February 26, 2026, amendments to the Criminal Code expanding the scope of espionage charges passed the National Assembly plenary session. It was the first revision since the Criminal Code was enacted in 1953, a gap of 73 years.

In the plenary vote, of the 170 members present, 163 voted in favor, 3 opposed, and 4 abstained. The People Power Party did not participate in the vote itself, citing opposition to the crime of legal

distortion, which was bundled with the same bill.

The core of the amendments is as follows. The existing provision punishing those who engaged in espionage on behalf of an enemy state was made more specific and its scope of application expanded. The new provision states that anyone who detects, collects, discloses, transfers, or intermediates state secrets on behalf of a foreign country or equivalent entity under orders, instigation, or other direction from such foreign entity, or who abets such acts, shall be punished by imprisonment of not less than three years.

Espionage on behalf of an enemy state remains punishable by death, life imprisonment, or imprisonment of seven years or longer, as before. Espionage on behalf of a foreign country is punishable by imprisonment of not less than three years. The difference in sentencing distinguishes between "enemy state" and "foreign country," enabling the disclosure of secrets on behalf of a foreign country to be punished under the serious designation of espionage.

With this, espionage charges can now be applied not only to disclosures made on behalf of North Korea but also to those made on behalf of any foreign nation involving state secrets or advanced technology. Industrial espionage linked to foreign corporations or overseas research organizations has also been included as a subject of punishment.

6 The Significance Han Dong-hoon Held in This Matter

The revision to the espionage statute was not accomplished through Han Dong-hoon's efforts alone. Lawmakers from both ruling and opposition parties submitted dozens of amendment proposals, the Ministry of Justice and National Intelligence Service engaged in repeated discussions, and more than 50,000 people signed a national petition.

Yet it was Han Dong-hoon who brought this matter to the center of public discourse. He first championed the revision during his tenure as Justice Minister, emphasized it again while serving as chair of the emergency response committee, and pushed it as party policy upon becoming party leader. He was also the one who most quickly identified the true nature of the shocking incident of military information service secret disclosure.

From Justice Minister to party leader, he never once set aside this issue with each change in position. This is an example of a politician with a prosecution background identifying a gap in the law and investing political resources to fill that gap.

The revised law will go through promulgation procedures and be implemented six months later. A fence that had stood for 73 years was finally being rebuilt.

Han Dong-hoon and the Establishment of the International Legal Affairs Bureau: Creating an Organization to Guard the Nation's Treasury

1 Why This Organization Was Needed

There are cases where foreign investors sue the Republic of Korea government seeking damages in large amounts. This is called ISDS (Investor-State Dispute Settlement). Put simply, it is when a foreign company sues before an international arbitration body, claiming it suffered losses in its investment due to the Korean government.

As of July 2023, a total of 10 ISDS cases had been filed against the Republic of Korea government. Among them, the largest cases were Lone Star (approximately 6 trillion won) and Elliott (approximately 770 billion won).

The problem was that there was no dedicated organization within the Ministry of Justice to handle such international disputes. Each time a lawsuit was filed, cases were entrusted to foreign law firms, with enormous fees paid, repeating this costly structure. Han Dong-hoon pinpointed the problem in this system precisely. "The issue of high costs in ISDS cases stems from insufficient domestic capacity to respond, which is why we inevitably end up relying mainly on foreign law firms."

He has also expressed this problem in a more direct metaphor. "As arbitration-related law firms and business have grown enormous, problem-raising has become widespread globally. Essentially, it is like how if you play pool long enough, only the pool hall owner makes money."

Whether winning or losing the lawsuits, hundreds of billions of won in attorney fees flow to foreign law firms. Han Dong-hoon resolved to change this structure fundamentally.

2 What Does the International Legal Affairs Bureau Do?

On July 26, 2023, the Ministry of Justice (headed by Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon) formally announced plans to establish the International Legal Affairs Bureau while publicizing the legislative notice for the partial amendments to the enforcement rules for the organizational structure of the Ministry of Justice and its affiliated agencies.

Under the International Legal Affairs Bureau, three divisions were established.

First is the International Legal Policy Division. It handles the opening of the legal services market, participation in negotiations for concluding treaties and other international agreements, and provision of related legal advice. When entering into new investment agreements with foreign countries, it is responsible for reviewing in advance whether there are provisions that could later become a source of dispute.

Second is the International Legal Support Division. It handles review work in civil and commercial matters for central administrative agencies including the President and Prime Minister, and addresses matters related to ISDS prevention. It plays the role of preemptively reviewing government policies from a legal standpoint to ensure they do not become grounds for foreign investors to file ISDS claims.

Third is the International Investment Disputes Division. It oversees ISDS response and operational matters. It is the frontline unit that directly responds to lawsuits already filed.

The director of the International Legal Affairs Bureau is held by a prosecutor or senior civil servant, with a total of 8 personnel deployed. By numbers alone, it is a small organization. However, these 8 people serve as the command center overseeing international lawsuits valued in the trillions of won.

Han Dong-hoon explained the significance of this organization as follows: "As we accumulate ISDS experience, we will be able to respond adequately while advancing national interest and reducing costs." It was a declaration to move away from dependence on foreign law firms and build the Republic of Korea's own capacity to handle international disputes.

3 Background to the Establishment: Lone Star and Elliott

It is important to note the timing of the establishment of the International Legal Affairs Bureau. It was July 2023.

Just ten days earlier, on July 18, 2023, Han Dong-hoon had announced follow-up measures regarding the Elliott ISDS ruling. It was a lawsuit Elliott had filed claiming it suffered damages due to undue intervention by the Korean government in the Samsung C&T-Samsung Life Insurance merger process. The Lone Star ISDS case had already resulted in an arbitral tribunal's award of approximately 300 billion won in damages in August 2022, and Han Dong-hoon had just filed a case to annul this ruling.

In establishing the International Legal Affairs Bureau, the Ministry of Justice stated that "major cases such as the Lone Star and Elliott ISDS rulings were successively highlighted as issues," and announced it would "substantially strengthen the response system."

Combined, the amounts from the two ISDS cases totaled close to 7 trillion won. This money came from taxpayer funds. While directly overseeing these lawsuits, Han Dong-hoon reached the conclusion that merely responding to each lawsuit was insufficient. Rather than hastily hiring foreign law firms after disputes erupted, a permanent organization was needed that could prevent disputes in peacetime and respond immediately when they arose.

4 The International Legal Affairs Bureau's First Achievement: Victory in the Lone Star Case

The first director to take office after the International Legal Affairs Bureau was established was Director Jung Hong-sik. He was an expert in international law and international arbitration.

In December 2023, Han Dong-hoon resigned as Justice Minister upon accepting the position of chair of the emergency response committee. Even after he left, the International Legal Affairs Bureau continued to operate. Through the final hearing in the Lone Star ISDS annulment case, the International Legal Affairs Bureau under Director Jung Hong-sik oversaw the proceedings.

On November 18, 2025, the Annulment Committee of the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) issued an order annulling the entire approximately 300 billion won damages award against Lone Star. In reporting the victory, Justice Minister Jeong Seong-ho acknowledged "the tremendous effort of Director Jung Hong-sik," describing him as a "highly capable

expert in international law and international arbitration."

In the organization Han Dong-hoon created, the expert Han Dong-hoon had selected concluded the lawsuit Han Dong-hoon had filed. Though the minister changed and the administration changed, the organization continued to operate. It was the moment when Han Dong-hoon's vision of safeguarding national interest through systems rather than relying on individual capacity was proven in reality.

5 A System Created by One Person's Decision

The establishment of the International Legal Affairs Bureau was not a dramatic event. It was merely an administrative decision to create an 8-person organization. It was not something that made headlines in the news.

Yet the funds this small organization preserved reached trillions of won. In the Lone Star ISDS case alone, an award of approximately 400 billion won including interest was completely overturned, and in the earlier Elliott ISDS case, the government's defense arguments were substantially accepted. Adding the Schindler ISDS complete victory confirmed in March 2026 (dismissing claims of approximately 320 billion won), the total amount of cases involving the International Legal Affairs Bureau is difficult to estimate.

Han Dong-hoon, as a prosecutor, directly investigated Lone Star's stock price manipulation and brought a guilty verdict. As Minister of Justice, he used that criminal conviction as a central weapon in ISDS defense strategy. And taking it a step further, he created an organization to ensure this fight could continue even after his departure.

To investigate, prosecute, obtain a guilty verdict, convert that judgment into a shield for international litigation, and establish an organization to wield that shield permanently. It is rare for a single case to form a single narrative over twenty years. That was precisely Han Dong-hoon's role in the Lone Star case.

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