

# [***How a Dior bag shook South Korean politics***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B99-9BC1-DY7V-G01C-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Seoul, South Korea (CNN) &#8212; South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol is months out from a crucial election seen as a barometer of his mid-term popularity, but surveys show he has a big problem - the latest scandal surrounding his wife.

Kim Keon Hee, 51, is not a typical first lady in patriarchal South Korea. She had already established a career in organizing art exhibitions when she married Yoon, then a prosecutor, 12 years ago. The couple have no children but own a brood of cats and dogs whose photos feature prominently in Yoon's presidential office.

Unlike her predecessors, who mostly kept a low profile in the shadow of their husbands, Kim has her own fan club and appears comfortable in the spotlight - as an avid promoter of [*Korean culture,*](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-loving-first-lady-of-korea-2325263) a vocal critic of the [*dog meat trade*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/asia/south-korea-bill-bans-dog-meat-bill-intl-hnk/index.html) and a [*glamorous fashionista*](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/02/113_332181.html) on overseas trips with Yoon, often donning outfits from domestic brands.

But it was reportedly her love of designer handbags that has thrust the first lady into the center of a raging political storm, in which she was accused of accepting a $2,200 Christian Dior bag as a gift.

Kim is yet to address the unfolding drama, despite growing calls for an explanation and an investigation, though her husband has said the allegations against her are a "political stunt." CNN has reached out to the presidential office for comment.

The first lady is no stranger to controversy - over the past few years, she has apologized for resume-padding and has faced allegations from academic plagiarism to stock manipulation.

Kim has not publicly commented on the two latter accusations. The presidential office has repeatedly denied that she was involved in stock manipulation.

The latest storm swirling around Kim has refused to blow over. Instead, it has escalated into a full-blown crisis for Yoon and South Korea's ruling party as they gear up for a closely contested parliamentary election in April.

"The Dior bag is the proverbial needle that broke the camel's back," said Cho Hee-kyoung, a law professor at Hongik University in Seoul, citing the "never-ending litany of scandal" surrounding Kim since Yoon started campaigning for president.

"But with the Dior bag, there is this powerful visual evidence."

'Dior bag scandal'

The controversy began in late November, when a secretly filmed video surfaced online purporting to show Kim receiving a cloud blue, calfskin "Lady Dior Pouch" from a Korean American pastor, Choi Jae-young.

"Why do you keep bringing these? Please, you don't need to do this," the first lady is heard saying in the video when presented with the gift. The footage does not show her taking the bag from Choi, though a Dior shopping bag is seen placed on a coffee table as they continue their conversation.

According to Choi, the meeting took place in Kim's personal office at her art exhibition company in September 2022, months after Yoon took office as president. Choi said he recorded the meeting with a secret camera hidden in his wristwatch.

The footage was released more than a year later by Voice of Seoul, a left-leaning YouTube channel known to be highly critical of Yoon's conservative government. The channel also provided Choi with the wristwatch and the Dior bag, according to the pastor.

South Korea's anti-graft law bans public officials and their spouses from receiving gifts valued at more than $750 in connection with their public duties. By appearing to not reject the bag, Kim gave ammunition to critics who have long accused her of using her position for personal gain.

On Wednesday, Yoon addressed the allegations publicly for the first time, claiming the video's release was designed to influence the April vote.

"This is clearly a political stunt, involving hidden camera footage captured a year ago and releasing it before an election," the president said in an interview with public broadcaster KBS.

"Going forward, my wife and I need to be more clear and firm when dealing with people so that the public doesn't worry."

Yoon did not specifically deny that his wife had accepted the bag but expressed regret that Kim was not more resolute with Choi.

"My wife lost her father during middle school, so when people from her hometown approach her, it's difficult for her to be cold to them," he said. "She couldn't say no to him when he kept telling her to visit. If there's a problem, it was that she couldn't cut him off more cold-heartedly and that's regrettable."

Some Yoon supporters have also accused Choi and the Voice of Seoul of setting a trap to smear the first lady and influence the upcoming election. Choi, an advocate for Korean reunification, has promoted friendly relations with North Korea, in contrast to Yoon's tough stance against Pyongyang.

Shin Pyeong, a lawyer and close supporter of Yoon, pointed to patriarchal attitudes in South Korea's traditionally conservative society, saying at the root of the scandal "lies the dark side of 'misogyny' and 'phallic worship.'"

"There is no other way to explain this strange craze that is biased against Kim," he said in a [*social media post*](https://www.facebook.com/lawshin/posts/pfbid0D8HfHgCiu5qjPzRdfnfMcD5u3k4FbcrNYZ1KGCabgSQiSurAgzDqjkxcDqjQc2hjl) in January, adding that in South Korea, "prejudice against women is still deeply rooted."

But critics say it has nothing to do with misogyny.

"It seems that the first lady seeks too much attention and there seems to be no one who can rein her in," said Cho, the law professor.

"I don't think it's got much to do with patriarchy. Her conduct would be objectionable even in a matriarchy," she said.

In a news conference in January, Choi defended his use of a hidden camera to film Kim, saying it was necessary to expose her alleged abuse of her position as first lady.

Choi said he had approached Kim on a messaging app to share advice on North Korea policy when Yoon was running for president. He said she agreed to a meeting in June 2022, during which his offer of a Chanel cosmetics set worth $1,300 was accepted by the first lady.

Choi claimed he asked to meet the first lady multiple times, but his requests were only granted on two occasions after he told her in advance that he would bring expensive gifts.

Choi also claimed that during the meeting in June, he overheard Kim talking on the phone and sounding as if she was meddling in the appointment of a senior government official. She "acted and spoke as if she was the president," he told the news conference.

Choi said he was shocked and decided to record his next meeting with the first lady to secure evidence of her interfering in state affairs.

In the secretly filmed footage of their next meeting, Kim is heard expressing her intent to "actively get involved in inter-Korean matters." But it was the Dior bag that sparked the most uproar.

"South Korean society reacts most sensitively when public figures or people close to them abuse their power and enjoy privileges by leveraging their political and social status," said Kim Yun-cheol, a ***politics*** professor at Kyung Hee University.

South Korean voters have a low tolerance for corruption in the wake of high-profile scandals involving former presidents, including the country's first female leader Park Geun-hye, who was impeached in 2017 following mass protests over her confidante's meddling in state affairs.

Yoon, who was part of a special investigation team that indicted Park, had vowed to continue to fight against corruption as president.

Political fallout

The expensive alleged gift has already proved costly for the first lady and her husband.

Kim has all but disappeared from public view, while support for Yoon dropped to a nine-month low.

The president's approval rate fell to 29% in a weekly poll released last Friday by Gallup Korea. The scandal around the first lady was cited as one of the top reasons behind public disaffection - after the economy and Yoon's perceived lack of communication.

In a Gallup Korea [*survey*](https://www.sedaily.com/NewsView/2D49S5IV0W) last month, 56% of respondents said Kim should apologize for allegedly receiving the Dior bag. In [*another poll*](https://n.news.naver.com/mnews/article/025/0003337136?sid=100) released by YTN cable news, 69% of respondents said they want an explanation from Yoon.

The scandal could not have come at a worse time for Yoon and the ruling People Power Party (PPP), who are striving to win back a majority in parliament to cement the conservative government's hold on power. The election is seen as a mid-term evaluation of Yoon's governance. If the PPP fails to retake control of the legislature, Yoon is likely to be plagued by political deadlock for the remainder of his five-year term.

The main opposition Democratic Party has seized on the issue to attack Yoon, accusing the president of "concealing suspicions" surrounding his wife.

The mounting public backlash has also caused a rift between Yoon and senior members of the PPP - one party official even compared Kim to Marie Antoinette, the 18th century French queen notorious for her extravagance. Some PPP members have urged Yoon and Kim to apologize.

The party's interim leader Han Dong-hoon, widely seen as Yoon's closest aide, acknowledged the scandal is "a matter of public concern." While calling it a "planned set-up using a spy cam," the former justice minister conceded "there were several misdeeds in handling the issues."

Shortly after his comment, Han told South Korean media he'd been asked by the president's office to resign as party leader, which he refused.

Han and Yoon have since appeared to be mending fences, showing up at public events together. Han later told local media he and the president are "in agreement on how to serve the people," and denied there was any rift between them.

High-profile first lady

Kim married Yoon in 2012, long before the career prosecutor entered ***politics***. By then, she had worked her way up in the art industry and founded her own exhibition agency, Covana Contents.

She was 39, he was 51, and they had been "acquaintances for a long time" until "a monk stepped in and played matchmaker," Kim said in an interview in 2018.

"My husband is an honest and pure person," she said at the time. "He didn't have any money and it felt like he would never be able to get married if it wasn't for me."

Kim Yun-cheol, the ***politics*** professor, said Kim Keon Hee differs significantly from other first ladies before her.

"She's been a 'career woman' who has succeeded in acquiring status and accumulating wealth through her socioeconomic activities, and she is not of a 'quiet housewife' style," he said.

"I believe the ideal style of first ladies in Korea has been someone who's elegant, quiet, and doesn't stand out in front, but Kim's style can be seen as exceptional."

The first lady's high profile has earned her fans but also increasingly drawn criticism.

"She seems to have a tendency to show off in her behaviour and that is why the public seems to have developed a feeling of rejection or disapproval, wondering if she is trying to attract attention by coming out and standing in front of President Yoon," said Kim Yun-cheol.

Kim Keon Hee has been mired in controversies ever since her husband joined the presidential race.

In 2021, she publicly apologized for inflating her resume, an issue that came under scrutiny during Yoon's presidential campaign. In her apology, Kim also vowed to "remain focused on my role as a wife" if Yoon won the election. Following her promise, Yoon abolished the office in charge of the first lady's affairs after he became president.

But Kim has been dogged by subsequent scandals and remained in the political limelight.

She has faced persistent accusations of plagiarism over her academic writings. Her PhD alma mater, Kookmin University, said [*it found no misconduct*](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/02/113_333788.html) in Kim's dissertation or other publications after an eight-month probe, but [*a group of professors disagreed*](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/11/113_335747.html) and released their own findings arguing otherwise.

The opposition has also long accused Kim of being involved in stock price manipulation of Deutsch Motors, a BMW dealer in South Korea, more than a decade ago - allegations the presidential office has repeatedly denied. Last month, Yoon [*vetoed a bill*](https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20240105000202) passed by the opposition-controlled parliament that would have mandated a special prosecutor to investigate Kim's alleged involvement.

The first lady is also haunted by her mother's conviction and one-year prison sentence for forging a financial document in a land purchase, a ruling upheld by the Supreme Court in November.

And last year, the government [*scrapped an expressway project*](https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230706005551315) in Seoul amid opposition allegations that its construction would benefit Kim's family by raising the price of land they own.

Cho, the law professor at Hongik University, said part of the public anger over Kim's scandals is also directed at Yoon.

"Because after all, he was elected because he seemed to be justice personified," she said, referring to the president's previous career as a prosecutor.

"He claimed that he would bring back justice and fairness, but he is bringing neither of these when it comes to his wife."

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