

Opinion

When politicians issue verdicts before the courts do — Korea barely blinks



By Michael Breen

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When President Lee Jae-myung, earlier this month, publicly suggested that two unpopular religious movements — Shincheonji and the Family Federation (informally known as the Unification Church) — should be considered for disbandment before courts had established any wrongdoing, one might have expected a loud and immediate debate about liberty.



When I wrote about this a couple of weeks ago, I assumed others would do the same. But there was remarkably little from the commentariat.

That puzzled me for a while. It makes more sense to me now. My mistake was one I have been making for decades: forgetting not to look at Korea through an Anglo-liberal lens.

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The silence on the rights of these minor religions is not because Koreans are indifferent to democracy, nor because the country lacks a concept of rights. It is because liberty — especially individual liberty — does not occupy the same sacred spot in the Korean moral imagination that I grew up with. As a result, outrage is not automatically triggered when power barges into that space without taking its shoes off.

Readers will understand that difference matters.

In liberal societies shaped by Anglo-American traditions, religious freedom and other forms of liberty are treated as a prepolitical right. The state does not grant them. The state is restrained by them. Thus, when executive power moves ahead of the judicial process, as the president did, the issue in such countries is not whether the target is liked, but whether a line has been crossed. The danger lies not in the group in question, but in the precedent being set.

Korean instincts are different. Here, religion is not primarily understood as a sphere of inviolable conscience. It is more often seen as a set of teachings offered to the public, with churches and temples being social actors operating in society. As such, they are evaluated in terms of harm, disorder, deception, or political manipulation.

When a religious group becomes unpopular, secretive, or entangled with power, the public question is not “are its rights being violated?” but “has it damaged the social fabric?”



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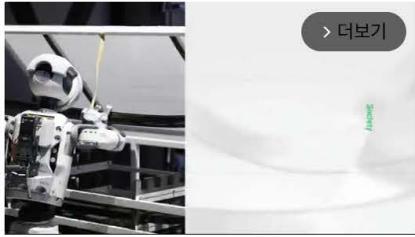
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That framing makes the president's comments feel less like an abuse of power and more like a rough expression of public frustration.

This portrait makes sense in its historical context. South Korea was not forged in revolt against tyranny but through a survival strategy of obedience before it. Koreans did not forge their national soul in the furnace of rebellion against colonial rule and dictatorship. They survived them. Actually, they survived a lot more – war, division, industrialization and the constant threat from the North. National identity rests less on rebellion than on endurance.

In that context, individual rights are not imagined as sacred inheritances. They are achievements, contingent on order and collective discipline and suffering. Older Koreans will still say, quite openly, that some rights must be withheld — such as the right to freely subscribe to the Pyongyang Times or to associate in a communist party — until the North Korea security threat disappears.

Another difference in Korea is that there is no deeply rooted fear of the state itself as a lurking tyrant. In the United States, constitutional liberties are sacralized precisely because the state is imagined as a potential enemy. In Korea, despite deep cynicism about politicians, the state has historically been experienced as an engine of reconstruction and growth.

The instinctive question is not “does the president have the right to say this?” but “are these groups harmful, corrupt, or politically illegitimate?”

In that context, Shincheonji has little moral capital, not simply because it is new or heretical, but because it is associated, rightly or wrongly, with secrecy and COVID-19 era controversies.

The Unification Church has been around a generation longer. Those who are more familiar know it as quite political. It formed a party a few years ago but dissolved it after it failed to win a single seat in a National Assembly election. It was the most outspoken of anti-communist churches and at the same time the most active in North Korea itself, through its nonreligious affiliates in Japan and other countries. When its founder, Moon Sun-myung, died in 2012, his widow received a personally signed letter of condolence from Kim Jong-un.

This engagement in political matters has now tipped over into corruption allegations, basically of gift-giving and donations to specific politicians on both sides, that most Koreans automatically assume to be true and which they automatically disapprove of (not least because support for politicians in Korea by religious organizations is illegal).

When such groups are targeted, few feel compelled to defend their freedom in principle.

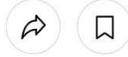
So, you might ask, why are you complaining, foreigner?

I'm complaining because Korea is not a ship at dock. Its democracy is a work in progress, and one move in the right direction is the recognition that, despite the way it's looked at now, religious freedom exists to protect unpopular religions. Similarly, due process exists not only to shield the innocent but to restrain power before guilt is established.

I do not expect the president to understand this. Because those with power naturally find it hard to appreciate anything that further limits it. But I do expect those with a voice to understand and say something about it.

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1d ago

This writer (followed by the notorious "Anglo-American" Korea-haters) keeps expressing his resentment and annoyance that Korean democracy has prevailed and is further advancing while it is in decline in the West and close to collapse in the US. His record, including his hidden articles from Dec 2024, shows that he precisely represents an Anglo-ILLIBERAL tradition. What he distorts, among many other things: European Enlightenment fought to liberate people, first and foremost, from TYRANNY, CORRUPTION AND POWER ABUSE CLOUDED IN 'RELIGION!'

👍 4



Foolslive

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Responding to the agents of the Holy International Bribery Union: Even worse than STATE-SPONSORED RELIGION, which does definitely not exist in Korea, is a PSEUDORELIGION-SPONSORED (EX-)GOVERNMENT. And look how desperately they try to falsely deny the systematic bribery!

👍 3



LetsMakeCommonSenseC

1d ago

Responding to "Foolslive" : "TYRANNY, CORRUPTION AND POWER ABUSE CLOUDED IN 'RELIGION'." was not the result of religious freedom but the result of STATE SPONSORED RELIGION. The very thing President Lee and Prime Minister Kim is advocating for. As for democracy collapsing in the US. That will not happen as long as people remember and value the principles of America's founding fathers who declared our rights didn't come from the state but came from God our creator. The American founding Fathers risked their lives to escape persecution and tyranny from areas that had state sponsored religion. Claiming the Unification Church is pseudo religion proves you have embraced state sponsorship of religion as do many other of your defamatory comments do. President Lee's supporting the "Church Dissolution Act", agreeing with so called religious leaders that the Unification Church and other religions are "illegitimate and heretical" and the imprisonment of Dr. Hak Ja Han and Pastor Son Hyun-bo prove state sponsorship of religion is a real threat in SK. Before you try to bump me off the comments(3 limit). Please consider the long term implications of state sponsored religion. Which authority will be responsible for determining which religion is a pseudo religion. The President or his agents. Our rights to worship God in accordance to our beliefs does not come from the government. It is a God given right. That is why communist believe in order to maintain power they must oppress religion. Is that what you want? The only Unification Church member convicted was Yun Young-ho for embezzling church funds. That is not systematic bribery.

👍 2

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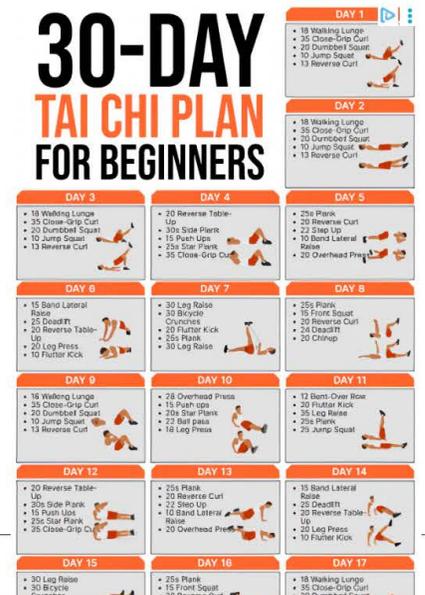
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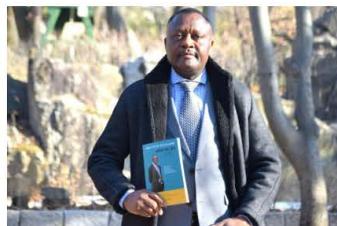
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