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SOUTH KOREA: When a Democracy Crosses the Line

European rights groups warn that the detention of elderly religious leaders exposes a deeper crisis for freedom of religion and expression in South Korea

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Seoul at night. A modern democratic capital where European human-rights groups recently raised urgent concerns about freedom of religion or belief (Korean Culture.org)

On a humid August day in Seoul, a 95-year-old man sat in a detention center wearing a prison uniform. Outside, members of his community gathered in quiet prayer—no banners, no slogans, only the soft cadence of scripture and the steady dignity of people who refuse to abandon their spiritual father. Inside, the man spoke through carefully chosen biblical passages, his voice steady even as a guard transcribed every word. His name is Lee Man-hee, founder of Shincheonji. His advanced age alone should have made prolonged pretrial detention unthinkable in a democracy that claims to honor human rights.

Yet on 7 August 2026, at the **Seoul Foreign Correspondents’ Club**, European human-rights organizations stood before journalists and declared that South Korea had crossed a dangerous threshold. **Human Rights Without Frontiers** (HRWF), **CAP Liberté de Conscience** (an ECOSOC-accredited NGO), **FOREF**, **CESNUR**, and *Bitter Winter* convened a press conference on “Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression in South Korea.” Their message was not a defense of any particular theology. It was the defense of a principle older and more fundamental than any single church.

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“The issues at stake lie at the heart of democratic society.”

— Hans Noot, Human Rights Without Frontiers

Hans Noot of HRWF opened the gathering with the clarity of someone who has watched too many democracies slowly erode their own foundations. When religious communities are stigmatized, peaceful gatherings restricted, and dissent treated as a problem to be contained, the consequences extend far beyond any single group or case. The conference, he insisted, was not about protecting one movement. It was about defending a principle: that fundamental rights apply equally to all.



The packed hall at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents’ Club during the HRWF press conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression in South Korea, 7 August 2026.

That principle is now under strain. The detention of **Chairman Lee** forms part of a broader pattern that includes concerns over the treatment of **83-year-old Hak Ja Han Moon** of the Family Federation, continued official scrutiny of **Segero Church in Busan** even after Pastor Son Hyun-bo’s release, public hostility toward a mosque project in Daegu, and the long-standing, still-punitive treatment of **Jehovah’s Witness** conscientious objectors. Alternative civilian service for objectors lasts 36 months—twice the length of ordinary military service—and is performed inside correctional facilities. Courts have repeatedly upheld this arrangement against constitutional challenges.

Thierry Valle of CAP Liberté de Conscience brought the discussion firmly into the realm of international law. South Korea ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1990 and the Convention against Torture in 1995. Both instruments require that detention be necessary, proportionate, and respectful of human dignity. Valle asked the obvious question: how does locking a 95-year-old man in pretrial custody for non-violent allegations square with those obligations? He reminded the room of the **presumption of innocence** and pointed to more humane alternatives already used in other democracies—**Cardinal Joseph Zen** released on bail in Hong Kong, **Buddhist Patriarch Thich Quang Do** placed under house arrest rather than imprisoned in Vietnam. The tools of restraint exist. The question is whether the will exists to use them.

How does locking a 95-year-old man in pretrial custody for non-violent allegations square with a democracy’s international human-rights obligations?



The speakers showing the statement at the press conference.

Michael Langhans of FOREF Germany sharpened the legal analysis. Pretrial detention is supposed to be exceptional. When the evidence is already considered sufficient for indictment, when the accused is elderly, immobile, and has cooperated with investigators, continued incarceration begins to look less like a procedural necessity and more like a statement. Langhans asked whether the evidence itself had been gathered with neutrality—or within a narrative that had already branded the community a “sect” or “cult.” The deeper question for South Korean lawmakers is whether measures designed to protect the integrity of elections can be applied in ways that effectively nullify the constitutionally and internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion.



The experts - from the flyer announcing thze press conference.

Márk Nemes of CESNUR widened the lens still further. **Shincheonji** is not merely a Korean phenomenon. It is a global movement with congregations across Europe, Argentina, Australia, and beyond. Recent scholarly investigations in those regions documented a measurable rise in hostility toward members precisely because of events in Korea. Persecution at the center radiates outward. The freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, and expression protected by **Articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR** do not stop at the Korean border. When a state targets a minority faith with disproportionate force, it injures believers far beyond its territory.

Massimo Introvigne, managing director of CESNUR and **editor-in-chief of Bitter Winter**, stated the matter with characteristic directness. South Korea “has crossed a worrying line.” **The Mandela Rules**—the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners—call for the use of non-custodial measures for elderly persons accused of non-violent offenses. Imprisoning a 95-year-old man

under these circumstances is difficult to reconcile with those standards. The charges themselves, tied to ordinary political participation by members of a religious minority, appear legally and conceptually overstretched. They fit a larger pattern of pressure against minority faiths that has been building for years.

South Korea “has crossed a worrying line.”

— Massimo Introvigne



Dr. Massimo Introvigne praying with Shincheonji believers before being admitted inside the Seoul Detention Center.

This is not abstract theory. Days before the press conference, Introvigne, Noot, and Valle visited the **Seoul Detention Center**. They joined the quiet prayer outside and then met Chairman Lee inside. What they encountered was not a broken man, but an elderly believer whose strength was spiritual rather than physical. The contrast between the dignified vigil outside and the heavy silence within the detention center walls made the abstract language of human rights suddenly concrete.

At the close of the press conference, the scholars present signed an official letter calling on the Government of the Republic of Korea to release Chairman Lee from custody immediately and allow him to face any legitimate charges without the additional burden of incarceration. That letter is more than a procedural request. It is a reminder that a democracy’s true test is not how it treats popular majorities, but how it treats those it finds inconvenient or theologically unwelcome.

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South Korea is a vibrant democracy, an economic powerhouse, and a valued partner in the free world. Precisely because of those strengths, the current trajectory is so troubling. When elderly religious leaders are held in pretrial detention under circumstances that strain proportionality and humanitarian standards, when minority communities face sustained stigma, and when the line between protecting

electoral integrity and suppressing religious expression begins to blur, the damage is not limited to the groups immediately affected. It reaches the credibility of the democratic promise itself.



Hans Noot delivering the statement to the Korean Human Rights Commission (Bitter Winter)

Freedom of religion or belief is not a privilege granted to approved faiths. It is a right that belongs to every person by virtue of their humanity. The press conference in Seoul was an attempt to recall that truth before it slips further from practical application. The scholars and advocates who spoke did not claim perfection for any religious movement. They claimed something more basic and more urgent: that a 95-year-old man should not spend his final years in a prison cell for non-violent acts of faith and civic participation, and that a democracy worthy of the name must find better ways to resolve its deepest disagreements.

The letter has been signed. The arguments have been made. The question now rests with the authorities in Seoul—and with all who still believe that human dignity does not expire at 95.

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#FreedomOfReligion #FoRB #SouthKorea #HumanRights #HRWF #FOREF #ReligiousLiberty

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