

A Selective Compassion? President Lee's Chuseok and the Detention of a Religious Refugee

10/11/2025 THOMAS J. WARD

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South Korea celebrates the resilience of North Korean refugees. Yet, it keeps arbitrarily one such refugee, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, in jail. An emic view from a Unificationist scholar.

by Thomas J. Ward



President Lee Jae-myung and First Lady Kim Hye-kyung Chuseok greetings. Screenshot.

Chuseok, along with the Lunar New Year, is one of Korea's most deeply rooted traditional holidays. A celebration of the harvest, family unity, and remembrance, it is a time when Koreans give thanks to Heaven for the bounty of nature while also honoring their ancestors who shaped the nation's destiny as well as their own. Traditionally, during Chuseok, families visit ancestral graves, share meals, exchange gifts, and extend gestures of goodwill and reconciliation beyond their own circles.

This year, during his first Chuseok as President, Lee Jae Myung embraced the symbolism of the season. He distributed gifts, hosted public events, and even held a gathering for elderly North Korean refugees who fled south during the Korean War. At the Peace Observatory in Incheon, he recognized the suffering and hardships that they had faced and celebrated their resilience.

But one refugee — perhaps one of the most globally recognized — was neither invited nor acknowledged. Instead, she spent her holiday alone, confined in a detention center in Seoul.

Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, 82, is a North Korean refugee who crossed the 38th parallel in 1948 as a seven-year-old, fleeing communist persecution alongside her mother and grandmother. Over the next seven decades, she would go on to co-found, with her late husband Reverend Sun Myung Moon, a global religious movement dedicated to family renewal, interfaith dialogue, and peacebuilding. Their movement — often misunderstood or misrepresented — has established institutions in over 120 countries, which are dedicated to honoring the Creator, civil society development, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding.

Widowed after 52 years of marriage, Dr. Moon raised 14 children, endured the loss of four,

and remained a devoted mother, grandmother, and now great-grandmother. She also carried on the leadership of her movement since Reverend Moon's passing in 2012, advocating for peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula — often through Track II diplomacy, cultural exchanges, interfaith dialogue, and humanitarian projects.

In November 1991, the Moons met with North Korean founding leader Kim Il Sung, helping to open a new channel of dialogue between Pyongyang and the wider world. That meeting led, in June 1992, to a temporary suspension of North Korea's longstanding "Hate America Month" and helped thaw tensions between North Korea and the U.S. years before terms like "denuclearization" and "normalization" entered mainstream diplomacy.

Those efforts have been recognized across ideological lines — from DPRK officials to U.S. State Department staffers, and even in secular Western publications like *"The Atlantic"* and *"The Daily Beast."*

Yet today, rather than being recognized as a national treasure or a world religious leader, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon sits in a Seoul detention center. Her charges? Prosecutors allege that she authorized gifts totaling approximately \$71,000 to influence Korean officials to increase foreign aid to Africa and support the establishment of a United Nations office at the DMZ. She has repeatedly denied authorizing such gifts. Furthermore, the initiatives in question — expanding humanitarian aid and promoting peace infrastructure — clearly offer no personal gain.

Despite having no criminal record, she was detained in pretrial custody. During her September interrogation, she waived her right to remain silent, cooperated fully, and consistently maintained her innocence. Nonetheless, she was denied bail — a striking decision given her age, deteriorating health (including macular degeneration and heart issues), and the benign, altruistic nature of the alleged policy changes she advocated for.



Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon arriving in court for interrogation. Screenshot.

This use of pretrial detention — often criticized as a tool of coercion — seems more about optics than justice.

The legal treatment President Lee Jae Myung faced less than a year ago was far less invasive than what Dr. Moon has faced. In 2024, Lee was convicted of making false statements during his campaign and still faces multiple ongoing investigations. Yet prior to and during his trial and following his conviction, he was never held in custody. No court deemed him a flight risk.

The contrast could not be starker.

In August 2025, President Lee publicly honored former President Kim Dae Jung, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who endured abduction, torture, and a death sentence under earlier Korean regimes. Once elected president in 1998, Kim chose reconciliation over revenge — even inviting his persecutors from the previous military governments to the Blue House, where he sought and welcomed their counsel during his presidency.

Kim Dae Jung showed that true leadership lies in compassion, not coercion.

President Lee praised that legacy last August, saying, “the path Kim Dae-jung paved is the future Korea must follow.” But actions speak louder than speeches.

Are echoes of Korea’s authoritarian past reemerging? Political opponents, religious leaders, and independent voices in civil society are increasingly subject to legal scrutiny, raids, and imprisonment. Dr. Moon’s case raises disturbing questions about selective justice — and whether it is being used to marginalize those associated with the previous administration or outside the current political orthodoxy.

It is worth asking: Why is an elderly religious leader being treated as a flight risk when she has remained in her residence since last May, when the investigations into her opened? Why is she perceived as a public threat? What precedent does this set for religious freedom and civil society in South Korea?

The government’s current posture may be legally framed, but its moral optics are dismal. A widow, a lifelong law-abiding citizen, a peace advocate, and a refugee who helped build modern Korea—even denied the chance to celebrate Chuseok with her family and faith community.

South Korea stands at a crossroads. It can either uphold the values that shaped its democratic identity—freedom of conscience, rule of law, and fairness—or it can slip back into a pattern of politically motivated suppression dressed in legal garments.

Presidents come and go. But history remembers how they governed, and whether they extended justice and compassion not only to their allies but to those who seem to fall outside the prevailing narrative.

Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon is not a threat to South Korea, and she is not a threat to President Lee or the current ruling government. She is a mother, a refugee, a widow, and a woman of faith whose contributions deserve acknowledgment, not incarceration. Compassion means little if it is only extended to the politically convenient. Justice means even less when it becomes selective.

This Chuseok, President Lee invoked unity and gratitude. He and his government can best live those words—not by speeches, but by deeds.

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