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A Visit to the Seoul Detention Center and the Difficult Path of Religious Liberty in Korea

by Massimo Introvigne | Aug 10, 2026 | News Global

August days of prayer and testimony—and the fragile dignity of a ninety-five-year-old man.

by Massimo Introvigne



The author praying with Shincheonji believers before being admitted inside the Seoul Detention Center.

The road to the Seoul Detention Center has a peculiar stillness in a Korean summer afternoon. It is a place where time seems to slow down, as if the air itself were aware of the stories carried within those walls. On August 6, accompanied by Hans Noot of Human Rights Without Frontiers and Thierry Valle of CAP-LC, I walked once more along that familiar path. I had been there before, during the long ordeal of the Unification Church's Mother Han, who now spends her days in a hospital bed. The building, with its severe geometry and muted colors, has become a reluctant witness to the suffering of elderly religious leaders.

Before entering, we stopped where the members of Shincheonji maintain their vigil for their detained leader, Chairman Lee Man-hee. They stand in quiet shifts, day after day, under the changing sky of Seoul. There is no spectacle in their presence. No slogans, no banners, no raised voices. Only prayer. A soft murmur of devotion that seems to rise from the road itself. Some utter prayers; others close their eyes, as if listening to something only they can hear. Their perseverance has the quality of a ritual, a rhythm of faith that does not falter. Sharing a moment of prayer with them felt like stepping into a stream of collective hope. Not to be moved by the gentleness of their determination was impossible.

Inside the detention center, the atmosphere changed. The silence itself was heavy. When Chairman Lee entered one of the small rooms reserved for meetings, the contrast between his age and the setting was almost unbearable—ninety-five years of life, distilled into the fragile figure of a man wearing a prison uniform. Yet the shock lasted only a moment. His posture was upright, his gaze clear, his voice steady. There was an unexpected vitality in him, a kind of inner radiance that seemed

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untouched by confinement.

A guard sat nearby, transcribing every word he spoke. We were forbidden from recording or taking notes, and warned that quoting him would be illegal. But he did not speak in anecdotes or commentary. He spoke through Scripture. Each sentence was a passage from the Bible, recalled with precision and offered with the calm assurance of someone who has lived his faith for decades. The guard, dutifully writing, was receiving a lesson in biblical exegesis he had not asked for. Chairman Lee's strength did not appear to come from physical resilience alone. It came from a spiritual reservoir that imprisonment could not drain.

The following day, August 7, we awakened to a different kind of gathering. Human Rights Without Frontiers held a press conference in Seoul, attended by over a hundred journalists, both in person and online. The room was filled with the quiet tension that precedes important discussions. Reporters from major international media listened as speakers described the concerns surrounding Chairman Lee's detention. The coverage in Korea and beyond reflected the gravity of the moment: the case was no longer seen as a local matter, but as a question touching the universal principles of human dignity, freedom of belief, and the treatment of older defendants.



A packed room at the press conference.

Hans Noot, Hungarian scholar Márk Nemes, German lawyer Michael Langhans, representing the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF), and I presented reasons for concern about religious freedom in Korea. They include media dominated by distorted anti-cult narratives, a draft for a law allowing for swift dissolution of religions pending in the Parliament, the selective application of laws against political activism of the clergy, which has led to the imprisonment of Mother Han, 83, and Chairman Lee, 95, and the violence of deprogramming, or forced conversion, of believers, which in some cases led to the assassination of Shincheonji members.

The arrest and prosecution for alleged violations of the Electoral Law of Busan's Pastor Son Hyun-Bo—now liberated while the harassment of his Segero Church continues—confirms that the crackdown is politically motivated. I also mentioned the influence of China, which has quietly worked to encourage persecution of conservative groups it has its own reason to dislike, establishing what is now a regular cooperation with Korean organizations opposing "heresies." Left-wing Japanese lawyers, who promoted the dissolution of the Unification Church in their country, are also part of this [trilateral cooperation](#) with Chinese anti-religious bureaucrats and Korean heresy hunters.

During the conference, Thierry Valle presented the written statement CAP-LC had submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council a few days before. His summary echoed the solemnity of the original text. The statement expressed concern that a man of ninety-five, accused of non-violent acts related to political participation by members of his

religious community, was being held in custody despite international standards urging restraint in such circumstances. It recalled that political engagement is a right enjoyed by all citizens, and that the separation of religion and state protects institutions, not individuals' civic freedoms.

[Download CAP-LC's written statement in PDF](#)

The statement noted that public remarks by the Minister of Justice, describing punishment as inevitable and referring to Chairman Lee as a false prophet, risked eroding the presumption of innocence. It also warned against inaccurate references to foreign cases, particularly concerning Japan, where political ties were not part of the judicial decision dissolving the Unification Church that has been repeatedly cited in Korea. CAP-LC urged the government to review the necessity of continued detention, ensure impartial proceedings, and base any measures affecting religious organizations on accurate information consistent with international human rights standards.

Supported by the testimonies of Korean personalities, all the speakers signed an appeal asking the Korean authorities to release Chairman Lee from custody, so that he may stand trial without being held in detention. We delivered it in person to the Korean Human Rights Commission.



Hans Noot delivering the statement to the Korean Human Rights Commission.

When one leaves the detention center, the world outside feels strangely loud. Cars rush by, conversations spill into the streets, and the city resumes its restless rhythm. Yet the image of Chairman Lee remains. A ninety-five-year-old man, seated with dignity, speaking only through the Bible, holding onto his faith as if it were a lifeline. His presence lingers like a question that refuses to fade.

South Korea has earned admiration for its democratic institutions in a part of the world plagued by totalitarian regimes. Those values shine brightest when applied to the most vulnerable. Chairman Lee's case is not only a legal matter. It is a human one. His continued detention raises concerns that touch the core of compassion and justice.

For reasons grounded in substance and reasons grounded in humanity, which also apply to Mother Han, Chairman Lee should be released. His strength is remarkable, but it should not be tested within the confines of a cell. The dignity of an older man, and of a nation that values freedom, both call for his return to the world outside those walls.





The speakers showing the statement at the press conference.

These cases touch the pulse of religious liberty in Korea, a freedom that has flourished through hardship yet still bends under the weight of suspicion toward minority faiths. The prayers whispered outside the Seoul Detention Center are more than solidarity for elderly leaders. They are a reminder that conscience is fragile, and that the dignity of belief must be guarded every day.

Korea's democracy has grown strong because it learned to protect the voices that stand apart. Its future will remain strong only if those voices continue to breathe without fear. If a community is treated as an outsider to civic life, the promise of freedom becomes thinner for everyone. The measure of a nation is taken at the margins, where groups seek only the right to exist without being misunderstood.

Cases like Chairman Lee's and Mother Han's are crossroads. Their release would honor their age and humanity, yet they would also affirm something deeper: that Korea chooses to stand with the principle that faith, in all its diversity, deserves space to live. Religious liberty is not an ornament of democracy. It is its heartbeat. And the world hopes to see that heartbeat remain steady and strong in Korea.

Religious Liberty, Religious Persecution, Shincheonji, South Korea



Massimo Introvigne

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions ([CESNUR](http://www.cesnur.org/)), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#) and of the executive board of University of California Press' [Nova Religio](#). From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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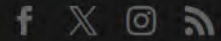


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Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[5 August 2026]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

The Detention of Chairman Lee Man-hee in South Korea

Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience (CAP-LC) submits this written statement to the Human Rights Council to express concern regarding the detention of Chairman Lee Man-hee, the ninety-five-year-old leader of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the Republic of Korea. CAP-LC has monitored the situation closely and considers that recent developments raise significant questions about the protection of elderly defendants, the interpretation of constitutional principles, and the broader implications for freedom of religion or belief.

Chairman Lee is being held in custody despite his advanced age and the non-violent nature of the allegations. The charges relate to political participation by members of his religious community. They do not involve threats to public safety, risks of flight, or conduct that would normally justify the incarceration of a defendant approaching one hundred years of age. The image of a frail religious leader being taken into detention has generated widespread concern among observers of the Korean justice system.

The accusations focus on claims that members of Shincheonji were encouraged to take part in internal political party procedures. Participation in political life is a right enjoyed by all citizens under international human rights law. The suggestion that religious believers should refrain from political engagement contradicts established democratic practice and raises questions about how the principle of separation of religion and state is interpreted. This principle protects institutions from undue interference; it does not require religious individuals to abstain from civic participation.

Statements made by public authorities have intensified these concerns. Remarks by the Minister of Justice describing criminal punishment of Chairman Lee as the “inevitable” consequence of his being a “false prophet” were issued while investigations were still ongoing. Such declarations risk undermining the presumption of innocence and may influence public perception of a case that has not yet been adjudicated. Authorities responsible for the justice system should avoid comments that appear to prejudge outcomes or diminish the impartiality of judicial proceedings.

The situation is further complicated by references to foreign cases that have been inaccurately described. Public statements in Korea praising the dissolution of a religious organization in Japan have cited political ties as a justification, although the relevant judicial decision does not mention such elements. Mischaracterizing foreign jurisprudence is problematic when domestic legislative initiatives are being considered that may affect the legal status of religious bodies. Accuracy is essential when discussing measures that could have far-reaching consequences for freedom of religion or belief.

Chairman Lee’s age raises special concerns. International human rights standards emphasize that pre-trial detention should be used only when strictly necessary and that the health and vulnerability of defendants must be taken into account. The Human Rights Council has repeatedly affirmed that states should adopt measures ensuring that elderly persons are treated with dignity and detained only in exceptional cases. The continued incarceration of a ninety-five-year-old man for non-violent allegations requires careful scrutiny.

South Korea has long been recognized for its commitment to democratic values and human rights. This reputation is strengthened when institutions demonstrate restraint, proportionality, and respect for fundamental freedoms. The treatment of religious minorities is an important indicator of this commitment. Ensuring that elderly defendants are not subjected to unnecessary hardship is equally essential.

CAP-LC respectfully urges the Government of the Republic of Korea to review the necessity of Chairman Lee’s continued detention in light of his age, health, and the nature of the allegations. Judicial proceedings should be conducted with full respect for the

presumption of innocence, and public authorities should refrain from statements that may compromise the appearance of impartiality. Legislative or administrative measures affecting religious organizations should be based on accurate information and should comply with international standards on freedom of religion or belief.

The Human Rights Council has emphasized that states must protect vulnerable individuals and ensure that legal processes do not become instruments of discrimination. The case of Chairman Lee offers an opportunity for the Republic of Korea to reaffirm its commitment to human dignity, due process, and the rights of all citizens, including older people and those in minority religious communities.
