FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Massimo Introvigne Warns S Korea Loosing Religious Choice

Knut Holdhus
August 8, 2026

Dr. Massimo Introvigne, managing director of CESNUR and editor-in-chief of Bitter Winter, at the Seoul press conference on August 7, 2026

The three stages of religious persecution: Introvigne brings warning to a South Korea at a dangerous crossroads for religious liberty

From the head table of speakers holding copies of a joint declaration at the press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on August 7, 2026, from left to right: Thierry Valle, president of CAP Liberté de Conscience, Márk Nemes, deputy director of CESNUR, Hans Noot, associate director of HRWF, Michael Langhans, executive director of FOREF Germany, Massimo Introvigne, managing director of CESNUR and editor-in-chief of Bitter Winter

A speech by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, managing director of CESNUR and editor-in-chief of Bitter Winter, at a press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on 7th August 2026. The event was organized by Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) together with CAP Liberté de Conscience (CAP LC), FOREF, the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) and Bitter Winter.

I'm a sociologist of religion and I have also served in institutional capacity, including as a representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for combating racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance.

When I was there, I co-authored at a conference in Rome what is called the Rome Model and is now widely quoted, a tool that predict that minorities, particularly religious minorities, are normally attacked through three stages: 1) intolerance - primarily by the media - 2) discrimination by courts of law, administrative authorities, and government, and then 3) persecution and violence.

This model applies to to both totalitarian and democratic states.

In fact, I'm not here to single out Korea.

This year I was called by the same OSCE to be a keynote speaker at a regional summit in Rome about intolerance and persecution of religious minorities in Western Europe.

There are only democratic countries in Western Europe, yet there are hate crimes.

And I discussed in particular the situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses, applying the Rome model and showing how intolerance led to serious hate crimes, including hundreds of instances in Europe of violence, in some cases of attempted homicide.

Coming to Korea, we see, as in many other countries, the three stages at work.

The first stage is intolerance, which is the prevailing depiction in the media of some religious minorities as "heretics", "cults", "false prophets", etc.

Intensely persecuted in South Korea: The Jehovah's Witnesses	*Intensely persecuted, even by government representatives: Shincheonji Church of Jesus*	Intensely persecuted, even by government representatives: Family Federation for World Peace and Unification

And this is targeting in particular the Unification Church - now called the Family Federation - Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below], Jehovah's Witnesses and others, relying largely on accounts by other religionists who are in competition with these groups, and apostate tax members.

The word "apostate" is not an insult. It is a sociological category designating the small minority of ex-members who spend their life attacking the groups they have left. Most ex-members are not apostates.

From intolerance, the step is short to discrimination by courts of law and administrative authorities.

And we are concerned to see in the Korean Parliament a draconian draft law allowing swift dissolution of religious organizations being discussed, one of the strictest in the world.

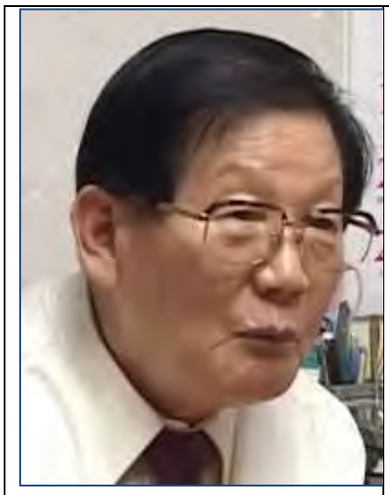
And we are also concerned by the selective and particularly harsh application of existing laws, particularly the Election Law (Public Official Election Act) to detain religious leaders, including the now liberated Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보), Mother Han (한학자) of the Family Federation and Chairman Lee (이만희) of Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below].

The last two cases are very surprising for me coming from European Union because Mother Han is 83, Chairman Lee is 95.

In the European Union we have laws mandating that such elder defendants, if they are not responsible of violent crimes or blood crimes [See editor's note 2 below], should await trial under house arrest and not in jail.

There is a danger that intolerance and discrimination will lead to actual violence.

And we have seen the violence in Korea while in the course of forced de-conversion we have a case of people severely beaten and even killed, as you all know.

 *Lee Man-hee (95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth)*	*Hak Ja Han (83), aka Mother Han, Co-Founder of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification*	Pastor Son Hyun-bo of Segyero Church in Busan, here August 2025

And that just proves how easily the slippery slope of intolerance and discrimination may lead to persecution.

So religious intolerance should be stopped when it starts. It's not a problem unique to Korea. We have the same problem in the European Union. There is a similar problem in the United States.

But there are some specially alarming cases in Korea. And the media may play a role in in alleviating the suffering of members of religious minorities. If there are specific common crimes, they should be investigated and punished.

But the blanket discrimination and intolerance against minorities is something that put in danger the very values on which our democratic social societies, including Korea.

Thank you.

> **[Editor's note 1:** Shincheonji, officially known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation.
>
> Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the Book of Revelation are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

[Editor's note 2: "Blood crimes" is a direct translation of a term used in continental European legal systems like Italy's delitti di sangue, referring to homicides or crimes involving severe physical bloodshed.]

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From the press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on 7th August 2026. Photo: HRWF

A group of European human-rights and religious-freedom organizations has raised concerns about what it sees as a broader deterioration in freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression in South Korea. The group made their case at a press conference held at the *Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club* on 7th August 2026, focusing particularly on the treatment of elderly religious leaders in pretrial detention and on what they regard as disproportionate measures against minority religious movements.

See also Korea Warned at Crossroads on Religious Freedom

The press conference was organized by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF) together with *CAP Liberté de Conscience* (CAP LC), *FOREF*, the *Center for Studies on New Religions* (CESNUR) and *Bitter Winter*, a magazine specializing in religious liberty and human-rights issues. The organizations emphasized that their concern was not to endorse the theology or teachings of any particular religious movement. Rather, they said, the fundamental issue was whether South Korea is applying its constitutional and international human-rights commitments equally to religious minorities and their leaders.

Focus on the detention of Lee Man-hee

***Lee Man-hee** (이만희 – 95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth). Photo: MBC PD수첩 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp*

In the press release issued after the Seoul press conference, it was pointed out that one of the central issues was the detention of 95-year-old Lee Man-hee (이만희), chairman of *Shincheonji Church of Jesus* [See editor's note below], a South Korean Christian movement that has experiernced considerable persecution since its establishment in 1984. Lee is currently being held in pretrial detention in connection with allegations concerning political activities and elections.

The organizations questioned whether imprisonment before trial is necessary or proportionate in the case of someone of Lee's advanced age, particularly when the alleged offences are non-violent. They called on South Korean authorities to reconsider his detention and to examine whether less restrictive measures could achieve the same legitimate legal objectives.

The issue is particularly significant because pretrial detention is not itself a finding of guilt. Under the presumption of innocence, a person awaiting trial is legally considered innocent unless and until a court establishes guilt. The speakers argued that this principle should be applied especially carefully when the accused is elderly and potentially vulnerable.

Thierry Valle, president of *CAP Liberté de Conscience*, pointed

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to South Korea's international commitments. The country ratified the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) in 1990 and the *Convention against Torture* (UNCAT) in 1995. Valle questioned whether placing a 95-year-old religious leader in prison before trial is compatible with the principles of human dignity, proportionality and humane treatment embodied in those international instruments.

***Thierry Valle** at the Seoul press conference on 7th August 2026. Screenshot from live transmission by HRWF*

He referred to cases elsewhere in Asia in which elderly religious figures were subjected to less restrictive measures. Among his examples were Cardinal Joseph Zen, who was released on bail in Hong Kong in 2022, and the Vietnamese Buddhist leader Thich Quang Do, who was placed under house arrest rather than imprisoned.

Hak Ja Han also mentioned

***Kept long-term in tiny cell under inhuman conditions:** Hak Ja Han, the True Mother, here on 27th March 2026 after more than 6 months in detention cell. Photo: FFWPU*

The conference also referred to the case of 83-year-old Hak Ja Han (한학자), president of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification*, often known in South Korea as Unificationism (통일교). She is currently facing criminal proceedings in South Korea in a separate investigation involving allegations of unlawful political activities and other offences.

The organizations did not argue that elderly religious leaders should be exempt from criminal investigation or prosecution. Their argument was instead that age, health, the presumption of innocence and the availability of alternative measures should be taken seriously when authorities decide whether detention before trial is justified.

Hans Noot, associate director of HRWF, said the question extended beyond the two individual cases. In his view, democratic societies are tested by how they treat unpopular or controversial minorities. He warned that when religious groups become stigmatized, peaceful religious activity is restricted, or dissent is regarded as something that must be controlled, the consequences can affect society more broadly.

Questions about the Shincheonji investigation

Michael Langhans, executive director of FOREF Germany, presented a legal analysis of Lee's detention. He questioned whether continued pretrial imprisonment was necessary if prosecutors already possessed sufficient evidence to bring the case to trial.

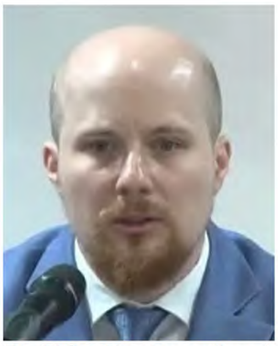
***Michael Langhans** at the Seoul press conference on 7th August 2026. Screenshot from live transmission by HRWF*

He also raised a different but related concern: whether the investigation has been conducted from a genuinely neutral standpoint. In particular, he questioned whether descriptions of Shincheonji [See editor's note

whether descriptions of Shincheonji [See editor's note below] as a "sect" or "cult" could influence the way allegations against the organization are interpreted.

This distinction matters because South Korea has a constitutional commitment to religious freedom. A government may investigate alleged criminal conduct by members of a religious organization, but, according to the organizations represented at the conference, the religious identity of those involved should not itself become a reason for heightened suspicion or harsher treatment.

Langhans therefore framed the Shincheonji [See editor's note below] case as a question that extends beyond one religious movement: How can governments enforce laws designed to protect democratic elections while ensuring that such laws do not unnecessarily interfere with freedom of religion and association?



Dr. Márk Nemes *at Seoul press conference 7th Aug. 2026. Screenshot from transmission by HRWF*

Concern about international repercussions

Márk Nemes, deputy director of CESNUR, emphasized that Shincheonji [See editor's note below] should not be viewed merely as a controversial South Korean church. It has developed into an international religious movement with congregations in numerous countries.

According to Nemes, recent academic investigations in Shincheonji [See editor's note below] congregations in Europe, Argentina and Australia have indicated increasing hostility toward the movement. He argued that developments in South Korea could therefore have consequences beyond the country's borders. Members of the movement living elsewhere also possess rights to practice and express their religion under international human-rights law, particularly Articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR.

Dr. Massimo Introvigne *at the Seoul press conference on 7th August 2026. Screenshot from live transmission by HRWF*

Massimo Introvigne, managing director of CESNUR and editor-in-chief of *Bitter Winter*, described Lee's imprisonment as a troubling development. He argued that international standards concerning the treatment of prisoners, including the UN Nelson Mandela Rules, point toward considering alternatives to imprisonment for extremely elderly detainees accused of non-violent offences.

Introvigne also questioned whether the allegations against Shincheonji [See editor's note below] members relating to political participation had been interpreted too broadly, describing the charges as potentially "legally and conceptually overstretched."

See Dr. Introvigne's speech

Other religious-freedom concerns

The speakers stressed that the Shincheonji [See editor's note below] case was only one element of a larger picture. HRWF referred to continuing concerns surrounding Segyero Church (세계로교회) in Busan

***Pastor Son Hyun-bo**, here August 2025. Photo: Bitter Winter*

Church (세계그리스도교회) in Busan, where PastorMárk Nemes Son Hyun-bo (손현보) reportedly faced official scrutiny even after his release from detention.

The press release also mentioned several other contentious issues: conscientious objection to military service, opposition to the construction of a mosque in Daegu, and questions concerning religious accommodation in schools.

HRWF has for decades documented the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse military service on conscientious grounds. South Korea eventually introduced an alternative civilian-service system, but critics have argued that the alternative remains excessively punitive because it lasts 36 months – twice the length of ordinary military service. South Korean courts have nevertheless upheld important aspects of the system against constitutional challenges.

At the conclusion of the conference, the participating scholars signed an official letter calling on the South Korean government to release Lee Man-hee (이만희) immediately. The organizations said they would continue documenting the cases and urged South Korean authorities, the media and the international community to examine them through the principles of due process, proportionality, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and equal protection under the law.

The central message of the conference was therefore broader than the fate of one elderly religious leader. HRWF and its partner organizations argue that the treatment of controversial or unpopular religious minorities provides an important test of South Korea's commitment to the democratic and human-rights principles it has pledged to uphold.

See also Korea Warned at Crossroads on Religious Freedom

***Text**: Knut Holdhus, editor*

***Featured image** above: From the press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on 7th August 2026, from left to right: Thierry Valle, president of CAP Liberté de Conscience, Márk Nemes, deputy director of CESNUR, Hans Noot, associate director of HRWF, Michael Langhans, executive director of FOREF Germany, Massimo Introvigne, managing director of CESNUR and editor-in-chief of Bitter Winter. Photo: HRWF*

[***Editor's note**: **Shincheonji**, officially known as *Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony*, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation.

Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the *Book of Revelation* are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

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