

Detention of 95-Year-Old Religious Leader Damages Korea's Reputation: Scholars Call for Release of Chairman Lee Man-hee

Concerns Raised at European Academy of Religion's International Conference Held in Rome—Strong Appeals Over Violation of International Law



Washington, D.C, District of Columbia Jul 24, 2026 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - European scholars of religion are making strong appeals to the South Korean government to release Lee Man-hee, the 95-year-old Chairman of Shincheonji Church, who remains in detention.

Chairman Lee was detained on 24 June on charges including violations of the Political Parties Act and was indicted on 29 June. The Joint Police–Prosecution Investigation Headquarters alleges that, between July 2021 and January 2024, he directed the mass registration of approximately 50,000 church members into a particular political party.

In response, Shincheonji Church stated that individual members freely participated in political activities and that both Chairman Lee and the church have faithfully cooperated throughout the entire investigation process, including the searches and seizures. The church also expressed deep regret, stating that detaining Chairman Lee, an elderly man aged 95, amounts in effect to a form of physical punishment.

Scholars of Religion State that Detaining an Elderly Person Over Non-violent Allegations Violates International Law

The European Academy of Religion (EuARe), a non-profit academic network connecting scholars and institutions of religious studies across Europe, held its Ninth Annual Conference in Rome, Italy, on 3 July, where the circumstances surrounding Shincheonji Church were addressed. During the session titled “Shincheonji, a Korean New Religion in Global Context,” European scholars of religion presented their respective academic papers on Shincheonji Church. The recent situation in South Korea, including the detention of Chairman Lee, was also shared with participants.

At the conference, Dr. Massimo Introvigne, a sociologist of religion and the Founder and Managing Director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), commented on the detention of Chairman Lee as follows:

“In all European Union countries, legislation mandates that, those older than 80, only exceptionally, should be put in jail; they should be under house arrest if needed, and only for violent crimes, if there is a risk of actual violence connected with blood crimes. Here, of course, there are no blood crimes, and the accusations are violations of electoral law.”

*“And what Korea is doing to this elderly religious leader is in violation of international law, including the United Nations’ so-called Mandela Rules, which mandate that preliminary detention should be, in general, not the rule, and only in an extremely limited number of exceptional cases may be applied to elderly prisoners. **So what is happening is an unmitigated scandal, which hides a political and religious vendetta.**”*

Eric Roux, an interfaith advocate and President of the European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom (EIFRF), who also participated in the session, reiterated the injustice of detaining an elderly person.

*“A man of 95 years old being put in jail is not something that you can reconcile with the objective of respecting human dignity. Even if what you pretend he has done is true, you would not put a man of this age in prison as is the case now. So I would suggest that this be reviewed very fast to avoid something that would be very detrimental to the reputation of South Korea, which is please, **get that man out of jail and do it now.**”*

Human Rights Expert Describes the Detention as Unthinkable in a Democratic Country

Human rights lawyer Alessandro Amicarelli expressed concern, citing South Korea's democratic tradition. He is a solicitor of the Senior Courts of England and Wales, a barrister in Italy, and Chairman of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB).

*“As a human rights lawyer, I always considered South Korea a true democracy where human rights are upheld like a foundation of the democracy. Unfortunately, **what’s happening now is truly shocking. ... We cannot accept that a religious leader in a democratic country, at the age of 95, has to be under this kind of pressure.**”*

“What we’re seeing right now, ... it looks like South Korea is departing from its own Constitution, its own human rights foundation. For this reason, I’m very happy to support Shincheonji in your fight against abuse and persecution in South Korea and anywhere in the world.”

Shincheonji Church emphasized that the detention of Chairman Lee has gone beyond academic interest and is now being raised as an international human rights issue.

The international human rights organizations United for Human Rights and Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience (CAP-LC; Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience) submitted a joint written statement on the human rights issues faced by Shincheonji Church to the 62nd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on 25 May (Document No. A/HRC/62/NGO/236; circulated on 10 June). In the statement, the two organizations assessed that “the situation has intensified” in South Korea and noted that framing members' registration with a political party as evidence of “religion–politics collusion” is inconsistent with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees every citizen the right to participate in political life.

The two organizations further stated: “In December 2025, the President ordered the creation of a joint police–prosecutor task force explicitly targeting Shincheonji... Senior officials have publicly referred to Shincheonji as a ‘criminal organization,’ statements incompatible with the presumption of innocence.” They also added, “We [urge] the Government of the Republic of Korea to reaffirm its commitment to freedom of religion, non-discrimination, and state neutrality.”

Shincheonji Church noted that “As support and petitions from prominent figures in the international community continue to grow regarding the detention of Chairman Lee Man-hee, pressure on the South Korean government and the judiciary is also mounting.” It further said, “The prompt release of Chairman Lee is a matter of safeguarding freedom of religion and human rights, which are core values of democracy.”



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