

International Rights Groups Raise Alarm Over Freedom of Religion and Expression in South Korea

International rights groups raised concerns over religious freedom in South Korea, calling for due process and the release of 95-year-old Shincheonji Chairman Lee Man-hee.



Sydney, New South Wales Aug 9, 2026 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), together with CAP Liberté de Conscience (CAP LC), which has accredited ECOSOC status at the United Nations, FOREF, CESNUR and Bitter Winter, held a press conference today at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression in South Korea. The issues addressed included concerns about the treatment of elderly religious leaders in pretrial detention, including questions of proportionality, humanitarian considerations, and due process. The organizations called on South Korean authorities to review the detention of 95-year-old Shincheonji Chairman Lee Man-hee and to ensure that the legal and administrative response to religious minorities remains neutral, proportionate, and consistent with South Korea's international human-rights obligations, including with respect to 83-year-old Mrs. Hak-ja Han Moon of the Family Federation.

The issues discussed today form part of a broader pattern of Freedom of Religion or Belief concerns in South Korea. Concerns have also persisted regarding Segero Church in Busan, which has reportedly continued to face harassment and official scrutiny even after Pastor Son Hyun-bo was released from detention.

Reporting has also raised questions about conscientious objection, public hostility toward a mosque project in Daegu, and religious accommodation in educational settings. Over the past decades, HRWF has documented the imprisonment of hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea as conscientious objectors, and although alternative civilian service was later introduced, critics maintain that it has been implemented in a punitive manner rather than as a genuine rights-respecting alternative, notably because it requires 36 months of service in correctional facilities, twice the length of regular military service. Recent court decisions have also upheld key features of that system against constitutional challenge.

Opening the conference, **Hans Noot**, Associate Director of HRWF, said the issues at stake "lie at the heart of democratic society," warning that when religious communities are stigmatized, peaceful gatherings are restricted, and dissent is treated as a problem to be contained, the consequences "extend far beyond any single group or case." He said the conference was not about defending any one theology or movement, but about "defending a principle: that fundamental rights apply equally to all."

Thierry Valle, President of CAP Liberté de Conscience, addressed the legality of Chairman Lee's detention under international law. Referring to South Korea's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1990 and the Convention against Torture in 1995, he questioned whether placing a 95-year-old in pretrial detention is consistent with those obligations. He stressed that the presumption of innocence must prevail over any presumption of guilt.

There are alternative more proportionate and more humane measures respecting the presumption of innocence and human dignity in democratic countries. And he cited precedents including Cardinal Joseph Zen's 2022 release on bail in Hong Kong and Vietnam's decision to place Buddhist Patriarch Thich Quang Do under house arrest rather than in prison.

Michael Langhans, Executive Director of FOREF Germany, presented a legal analysis questioning whether pretrial detention for Chairman Lee of the Shincheonji Church was necessary given evidence already sufficient for an indictment, and whether that evidence was gathered neutrally rather than through a narrative framing the defendant's community as a "sect" or "cult." He argued that the case raises a broader question for lawmakers: whether measures meant to protect fair elections can be applied without nullifying the constitutionally and internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion.

Márk Nemes, Deputy Director of CESNUR, shared his thoughts on the effects of ongoing persecution and its possible ramifications for minority faiths. He noted three recent scholarly investigations conducted in selected Shincheonji congregations in Europe, Argentina, and Australia, each finding worrisome increase in hostility toward the otherwise peaceful and cooperative religious movement. He stressed that Shincheonji is not simply a South Korean minority church but a global religious movement with congregations worldwide. The disproportionate persecution in South Korea affects the lives of those congregants abroad, whose freedoms for expressing and practicing faith, enshrined in ICCPR Articles 18 and 19, are inalienable rights and must be considered during this current process.

Massimo Introvigne, Managing Director of CESNUR and Editor-in-Chief of Bitter Winter, said South Korea "has crossed a worrying line" by arresting Chairman Lee, arguing that international standards such as the Mandela Rules would call for house arrest rather than imprisonment for a 95-year-old accused of a non-violent offence. He said the charges, tied to ordinary political participation by members of a religious minority, "appear legally and conceptually overstretched," and warned that the case fits a broader pattern of pressure against minority faiths in the country.

The organizations called on South Korean authorities, the media, and the international community to

examine these developments with close attention to due process, proportionality, and the equal protection of fundamental rights, and made further documentation available to support continued reporting.

At the conclusion of the press conference, the scholars in attendance signed an official letter calling on the Government of the Republic of Korea to immediately release Chairman Lee from custody.

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HRWF YouTube

Note: The full proceedings of the Press Conference can be watched on [HRWF YouTube](#)

Additional Articles

[Link here](#) in English and Korean

• Speakers and Organising Institutions

Hans Noot

Hans Noot holds a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior from Brigham Young University. Over a career spanning more than three decades, he has directed international educational and civil-society programmes across the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Ireland, the Czech Republic, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. He currently serves as Associate Director and a Board Member of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) and as Director of the Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief. A widely published commentator on freedom of religion or belief, he regularly represents his organisations before international institutions and policymakers, and his written work is cited across a range of human-rights and religious-freedom publications.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

Human Rights Without Frontiers International (HRWF Int'l) is a leading non-profit association dedicated to shaping European and international policy in ways that strengthen democracy, uphold the rule of law, and protect human rights globally. Its influence extends across a robust network of associated member organisations spanning Denmark, France, Greece, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Moldova, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Since its inception, the organisation has been guided by Executive Director Willy Fautré, a respected and long-standing human rights activist with decades of experience on the international stage. HRWF Int'l conducts rigorous research, field missions, analysis, and monitoring of a wide range of human rights concerns in countries around the world, drawing on an extensive international network of correspondents who provide the NGO with reliable, first-hand information from the ground.

Thierry Valle

Thierry Valle has built a career of more than two decades in international human-rights advocacy, with a particular focus on freedom of conscience and freedom of religion or belief. He has lectured extensively

on these subjects at conferences and academic and policy venues around the world, and has represented his organisation in formal submissions and oral interventions before the United Nations Human Rights Council and European Union institutions. He currently serves as President of CAP Liberté de Conscience, an organisation holding special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and is recognised within the field as an experienced voice on the legal and policy frameworks that protect freedom of conscience internationally.

CAP LC

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

CAP Freedom of Conscience is a respected secular European NGO holding United Nations Consultative Status, established in 1995 and dedicated to defending the fundamental Right of Freedom of Religion and Belief. It plays an active role in combating all forms of discrimination based on religion or belief, alerting European and international bodies and driving meaningful policy engagement on these issues. CAP Freedom of Conscience carefully collects testimonies of discrimination and human rights violations affecting religious or belief communities, disseminating them to international bodies in order to raise awareness, inform decision-makers, and generate vital debate on the protection of Freedom of Religion and Belief. As a member of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB) and the European Network of Religion and Belief (ENORB), and as a participant in the Civil Society Platform of Fundamental Rights created by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, CAP Freedom of Conscience is firmly embedded within the leading European networks shaping the future of religious freedom.

Michael Langhans

Michael Langhans is a German legal expert specialising in family and child-custody law, with particular expertise in cases requiring family-court psychological assessments. A graduate of the University of Augsburg, he studied under former German Federal Constitutional Court Justice Johannes Masing, building a legal career on complex custody and family-law disputes before extending his expertise into freedom of religion or belief. He now serves as Executive Director of FOREF Germany, the newly established German section of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe, leading its legal and advocacy work in the country.

FOREF Germany

FOREF Germany is the newly established German section of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF), an independent, secular human-rights organisation with roots stretching back to 1998. Launched in December 2025 through a partnership between FOREF co-founder Peter Zoehrer and German legal expert Michael Langhans, FOREF Germany brings deep, specialised legal expertise in family and custody law directly to the defence of religious minorities in the country. With the relaunch of its German-language platform in March 2026, the organisation is positioned to become a leading voice for freedom of religion or belief in one of Europe's most influential nations.

Prof. Massimo Introvigne

Massimo Introvigne is an Italian sociologist of religion, author, and intellectual-property attorney whose scholarship spans more than four decades. He has authored approximately 70 books and over 100 academic articles in the sociology of religion, and is widely regarded as one of the field's foremost international authorities — described by fellow academics as “one of the major names in the study of new religions” and as being “among the world's leading scholars of new religious movements.” He co-

founded CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions) in 1988 and has served as its Managing Director since, and is also Editor-in-Chief of the daily magazine Bitter Winter. His research has been presented before academic conferences, parliamentary bodies, and international organisations including the OSCE.

CESNUR *Center for Studies on New Religions*

CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, was founded in 1988 and is recognised as the oldest scholarly organisation devoted exclusively to the academic study of new religious movements and religious pluralism. In more than three decades of activity, it has convened scholars from leading universities across Europe, North America, and Asia, with over 1,000 papers presented at its international conferences and seminars — many going on to appear in leading international journals, alongside CESNUR's own peer-reviewed Journal of CESNUR. The organisation is directed by Managing Director Massimo Introvigne, one of the most widely published scholars in the sociology of religion, and also publishes Bitter Winter, a daily magazine on religious liberty and human rights that is regularly cited by journalists and policymakers researching religious minorities worldwide.

Bitter Winter

Bitter Winter was launched in May 2018 as a pioneering online magazine dedicated to religious liberty and human rights in China, published by CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, headquartered in Torino, Italy. Since December 1, 2020, Bitter Winter has expanded with a dedicated international section covering religious liberty worldwide, and continues to grow its coverage into new countries and emerging issues with each passing year. Being published by CESNUR gives Bitter Winter a particularly sharp, well-informed lens on religious liberty issues connected with new religious movements, while its broader mission ensures thorough coverage of all forms of religion and belief — making it an increasingly trusted and cited resource for readers following religious freedom developments around the globe.

Dr. Márk Nemes

Dr. Márk Nemes is a Hungarian historian and philosopher specialising in the theory of religion. He completed his PhD in Philosophy at the University of Szeged's Málnási Bartók György Doctoral School in 2025, and was awarded the prestigious Hungarian National Eötvös Scholarship in recognition of his research. He holds a full-time researcher and research-coordinator position at the Hungarian Academy of Arts' Research Institute for Art Theory and Methodology in Budapest, where his work explores the intersections of art, aesthetics, and religiosity. In 2025 he was appointed Deputy Director of CESNUR, and he is a co-founder of CESAR (Central European Symposium for the Academic Study of Religion), a research network supporting early-career scholars of religion across Central and Eastern Europe.

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