

Forced Conversion in South Korea Should Be Put to an End: An Open Letter to President Moon Jae-in

국제 인권 단체들과 학계 단체 : 국제 인권 단체들과 학계 단체

Dear President Moon:

국제 인권 단체들과 학계 단체:

We represent international NGOs and scholarly organizations specialized in researching religious pluralism and new religious movements throughout the world, and advocating for religious liberty.

국제 인권 단체들과 학계 단체는 국제 인권 단체들과 학계 단체 NGO 단체와 학계 단체를 대표합니다.

South Korea is a democratic country in an area where several totalitarian regimes persecute believers of all religions. We commend your government's efforts to speak out for human rights and religious liberty in Eastern Asia.

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At the same time, religious liberty is a fragile human right. All countries have their own problems, particularly when it comes to small or unpopular minorities. As the United Nations stated in CCPR's *General Comment No. 22 to Article 18* (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Article 18 is not limited in its

application to traditional religions” and condemns “any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community.”

South Korea has a large number of successful Christian new religions. The fact that they have non-conventional theologies and grow by converting members of traditional Christian churches make them the target of hostility by some mainline denominations. Obviously, theological criticism is itself part of religious liberty. It is an entirely different matter when adult members of new religions are kidnapped, in most cases by their parents, kept in a situation of confinement, and submitted to all sort of pressures by specialized “counselors” or “deprogrammers,” who are often pastors of the mainline churches, to forcibly compel them to abandon their faith and “convert” them back to the religion of their parents.

We have seen all this before. Kidnapping and “deprogramming” members of groups disparagingly labeled as “cults” was something that happened in the 20th century in the United States and Europe, until courts of law there banned the practice as illegal and several deprogrammers went to jail. The practice continued in Japan, but ultimately was declared

illegal. The fact that they have non-conventional theologies and grow by converting members of traditional Christian churches make them the target of hostility by some mainline denominations. Obviously, theological criticism is itself part of religious liberty. It is an entirely different matter when adult members of new religions are kidnapped, in most cases by their parents, kept in a situation of confinement, and submitted to all sort of pressures by specialized “counselors” or “deprogrammers,” who are often pastors of the mainline churches, to forcibly compel them to abandon their faith and “convert” them back to the religion of their parents.

We have seen all this before. Kidnapping and “deprogramming” members of groups disparagingly labeled as “cults” was something that happened in the 20th century in the United States and Europe, until courts of law there banned the practice as illegal and several deprogrammers went to jail. The practice continued in Japan, but ultimately was declared

illegal there, too.

Parents are not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity. "Parents" are not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity. Parents are not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity. 20 years ago, parents were not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity.

South Korea may well be the last democratic country in the world where deprogramming is still tolerated, perhaps because the Korean ethos regards it as a "family matter" and believes that parents have authority on their children, even if they are adult and may be 30 or 40 years old. This, however, should not authorize parents to commit serious crimes.

Parents are not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity. Parents are not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity. Parents are not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity. 30-40 years ago, parents were not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity. Parents are not allowed to force their children to convert to Christianity.

Other groups are targeted too, but we are particularly concerned about members of Shincheonji, which reports 1,444 deprogrammings since 2003. Two members of Shincheonji, Ms Kim Sun-Hwa in 2007 and Ms Gu Ji-In in 2018 died during attempts at deprogramming. For Gu, this was the second deprogramming, after a previous attempt in 2016 had failed. Those involved in the deprogrammings claimed deaths were unrelated to the forced conversion process, but co-religionists believe otherwise. Even after Gu's death, more than 100 deprogrammings were reported.

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Once again, theological controversies about Shincheonji are not the problem here. Everybody is free to criticize Shincheonji's theology or proselytization strategies, and of course Shincheonji should also be free to criticize the theology of other churches. Kidnapping and false imprisonment,

however, not to mention murder, are crimes.

These actions are not only crimes but also violations of human rights. The fact that these actions are carried out in the name of religion is a serious concern. We call on the South Korean government to take immediate action to stop these actions and to protect the rights of the victims.

Deprogramming is also supported by hate speech going well beyond the normal boundaries of religious controversy and dehumanizing members of Shincheonji, thus justifying and preparing violence against them. Specialized institutions called "Cult Seminars" have a key role in propagating these forms of hate speech, while "Cult Counseling Offices" operated by some mainline Christian churches and pastors incite relatives to kidnap adult children and put them in touch with the deprogrammers.

We call on the South Korean government to take immediate action to stop these actions and to protect the rights of the victims. "Cult Seminars" and "Cult Counseling Offices" are the main sources of hate speech and violence against Shincheonji members. We call on the South Korean government to take immediate action to stop these actions and to protect the rights of the victims.

Dear President Moon, we ask your intervention in persuading the South Korean authorities that it is great time to investigate Cult Seminars and Cult Counseling Offices, act against hate speech, investigate in depth accusations of forcible deprogramming, put a stop to this obnoxious practice, and hold those responsible fully accountable.

We know that you attach great importance to democratic values and human rights. The respect of human rights is the key element for the international reputation of a democratic country and its leaders. Those Shincheonji members who are kidnapped and abused are Korean citizens, women and men whose human rights are brutally violated. A statement on this matter was filed at the Forty-first Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, and attracted international attention. Should kidnappings and coercive conversions continue in South Korea, the attention of the international community will

become more and more focused on these gross violations of basic human rights in South Korea, and the institutions of your country will be increasingly criticized. Your personal intervention is urgently needed.

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Asociación por la Defensa de la Tolerancia y los Derechos Humanos

CAP-LC – Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions

CLIMS – Centre de liaison et d'information concernant les mouvements spirituels

EIFRF – European Inter-Religious Forum for Religious Freedom

Fedinsieme

FOB – European Federation for Freedom of Belief

FOREF – Forum for Religious Freedom Europe

Fundación para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad

Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief

HRWF – Human Rights Without Frontiers

LIREC – Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and Conscience

ORLIR – International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees

Osservatorio sul Pluralismo Religioso

Soteria International