

SOUTH KOREA: Being called a cult is one thing, being blamed for an epidemic is quite another

How one mysterious church became a lightning rod for South Koreans' anger over the coronavirus outbreak

By Raphael Rashid

The New York Times (09.03.2020) – <https://nyti.ms/3b5IenM> – The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in South Korea neared 7,400 on Monday morning. As many of them have been traced back to the mysterious Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the organization has become a lightning rod for the public's wrath and a ready outlet for longstanding prejudice.

The outbreak has centered on Daegu, a city of about 2.5 million in the country's southeast, after a 61-year-old Shincheonji congregant – known as Patient No. 31 – is believed to have infected many other worshipers during services. The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that as of Saturday, 63.5 percent of all confirmed cases in the country were “related to Shincheonji.”

The government, after a sluggish and naïve initial response – and President Moon Jae-in's ill-advised comment in mid-February that Covid-19 would “disappear before long” – is now

going full throttle trying to contain the epidemic: Parliamentary elections are scheduled for April 15.

The authorities have begun a vast, fast program to test potential Covid-19 patients. It is open to all (including undocumented immigrants) and free of charge for anyone who displays telltale symptoms or has a doctor's referral. Special drive-through clinics have been set up. More than 196,000 people had been tested as of Monday morning.

But anger is still running high – South Korea has the second-largest number of confirmed Covid-19 cases of any country, after China – and Shincheonji, which has become so closely associated with the outbreak, is taking much of the blame.

Some of Shincheonji's practices – secrecy, the banning of health masks, praying in close proximity – are said to have helped spread the disease among congregants. The church's leaders have been accused of deliberately withholding information about its membership, stymying the health authorities' efforts to trace and test every person who might have come into contact with someone infected with the virus. Shincheonji's founder could face murder charges.

The church has refuted all accusations. In a "letter of appeal" posted on its website on March 4, it also claims that "some 4,000 cases of injustice against Shincheonji congregants" had been reported since the beginning of the outbreak. Some members were fired by their employers for belonging to Shincheonji, it alleges; others were abused by their spouses. The church's website maintains a page under the

header “Covid-19/Fact-checker.”

The Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony – as its full name goes – was founded in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, now 88, whom it presents as the “Promised Pastor” sent by Jesus and a man uniquely capable of deciphering the Bible’s Book of Revelation. Shincheonji claims that it has more than 245,000 followers.

About 27 percent of South Koreans identified as Christian in the 2015 national census. The country counts dozens of Protestant megachurches, including some of the largest in the world; in and around Seoul alone, there are 15 with over 10,000 members each. Last year, more than 28,000 missionaries from South Korea went on missions to 171 countries.

Mainstream Christian groups, many of which are Protestant, reject Mr. Lee’s teachings and call Shincheonji a cult. The Presbyterian Church of Korea claims that Mr. Lee’s views – including, for example, that Jesus is not God incarnated – are “heretical” and “anti-Christian.”

But being called a cult is one thing, and being blamed for starting an epidemic is quite another. Yet some members of the public, the media and the political class have, in effect, equated the two charges, out of fear, confusion or political expediency.

With no clear front-runner to take over after Mr. Moon, the president, is set to leave office in May 2022, a raft of

contenders are hustling to establish their credentials for his position or a top job in the future. With all the seats in the National Assembly in contest next month, the election is also something of a gauge for that other big race.

On Feb. 25, Lee Jae-myung, the governor of Gyeonggi Province and a member of the ruling Democratic Party, made a show of going to Shincheonji's headquarters along with 40 public servants, ostensibly to retrieve, and forcibly if necessary, the list of the church's members. "This is a state of war," the governor is reported to have said.

Within days, Minister of Justice Choo Mi-ae, an ally of the president, instructed prosecutors to investigate Shincheonji if it obstructed or refused to cooperate with the authorities. This, even though prosecutors in Daegu have said that they needed more time to decide if a search warrant was in order.

Then, it was the mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon, who called on prosecutors to press charges against Shincheonji's leadership, for "murder through willful negligence." Mr. Park briefly ran for the presidency in 2017, and this gambit seemed designed to project authority and attract media attention.

Never mind, apparently, that Kim Kang-lip, the vice minister of health, has publicly stated that Shincheonji has been cooperating and providing the data requested of it. Mr. Kim has also warned that taking forceful measures against the church could scare its members into hiding and complicate efforts to contain the outbreak.

People are anxious, understandably. Some coronavirus patients are said to have died at home after being turned away from hospitals that had run out of beds for patients. But then some hospitals have also reported turning away people displaying symptoms of Covid-19 if they had not recently traveled to China – or because they were not members of Shincheonji. This, too, singles out and stigmatizes the church, breeding resentment against it.

In a survey released on March 2 by the local pollster Realmeter, more than 86 percent of respondents said they wanted Shincheonji to be searched so that the authorities could check its membership. A petition calling on Shincheonji to be dissolved – which was uploaded to the president's official website – has received more than 1.25 million signatures.

Then again, there is also a petition calling for Mr. Moon's impeachment, and it had garnered the support of more than 1.4 million people by March 5, when the drive ended. (The country's total population is close to 52 million.)

Opposition parties have criticized Mr. Moon's administration for its handling of the epidemic, arguing that it should have blocked all arrivals from China as early as late January, well before the cluster of cases linked to Shincheonji broke out in mid-February.

Of course, none of this absolves Shincheonji of potential wrongdoing. Shincheonji is secretive, and its leaders sometimes are deliberately provocative: Mr. Lee initially said

that the epidemic resulted from “the evil who got jealous of Shincheonji’s rapid growth” – before calling it “a great calamity” at a news conference at one of the church’s buildings near Seoul last week.

Outside that building, a woman holding up placards denouncing the church’s “pseudo-religion” said she was searching for her daughter, a Shincheonji member, whom she had not seen for years. This mother is hardly the first person to accuse the church of indoctrinating a relative, or of forcing members to break off ties with their families.

But even if the worst of these claims is true, Shincheonji also has been, quite simply, unlucky to catch the coronavirus in its own way. And now it is paying a heavy price for public prejudice and political opportunism.

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