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## South Korea: Can unpopular sect expect justice?

– By Michael Breen – The Korea Times (09.08.2020) – <http://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=293834> – The current investigation into Lee Man-hee, founder of the Shincheonji sect, moved a step forward last week with prosecutors applying to the court for an arrest warrant.

As readers will recall, the issue here goes back to February when a large number of sect members in Daegu caught the coronavirus. At the time, news reports claimed that efforts by health authorities to map the extent of the cluster were held

up because of the church's unwillingness to hand over lists of its members.

The church argued that it was fully cooperating but needed time to verify and update its lists. But prosecutors are convinced that Lee conspired with other church officials to conceal the identity of members and provide false information about them and places where they worshipped. This, they say, amounted to deliberate obstruction of government, which is illegal in an emergency like COVID-19.

Given the 97 percent conviction rate in criminal cases in this country, the future doesn't look good for the 89-year-old religious leader. He'll probably end up in jail. If he does, will justice have been served?

Well, that depends what you mean by justice. For a lot of people I know, Lee in jail equals justice. Like Al Capone finally being nailed for tax evasion, the actual charge is a pesky technicality. Among all the world's religions, it's normal to like only one. Most of us tolerate a few more. But nobody likes someone who starts one, even in civilized society. That's Lee's real crime.

But, sticking to the specific charge, here is a follow-up question: would justice be served if prosecutors were to go after others suspected of having similarly obstructed efforts to fight the pandemic? (And, given the overwhelming conviction rate, "going after" means they're guilty). How about the owners of the Itaewon clubs, where the next cluster was? Are they to be jailed because they allowed customers in without

recording their identities? What about the patrons? Could they be done for conspiring with the club owners?

I ask these questions for two reasons. One is that I fear this is a witch-hunt. It seems obvious to me that the only reason prosecutors are going after the Shincheonji founder, or that they would go after the Itaewon clubbers, is because they are unpopular. Had the cluster been the main Jogye Temple or the Myeondong Roman Catholic Cathedral or at the Protestant Full Gospel Church in Seoul's Yeouido, this wouldn't be happening.

For politicians and others who comment in public, Shincheonji is a safe target. You may remember that when media reported that Shincheonji was dragging its feet with the member lists, two presidential hopefuls, Gyeonggi Governor Lee Jae-myung and the late Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon attacked the church quite forcefully and found their approval ratings boosted for it.

But the best evidence that this is a witch-hunt is that the prosecutors have thrown in a financial charge for good measure in case the obstruction of government charge doesn't stick. They found that Lee had apparently used 5 billion won of church funds for the construction of his own house. Even if the church can show it paid Lee this money legitimately, or if indeed the church owns the house, the court is almost certain to accept this as embezzlement if the prosecutors say it is. (That was fortunate for the prosecutors because embezzlement really is a crime.)

My second reason for questioning all this is that I wonder what such an application of justice says about our society.

We're in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic. Health authorities are doing a wonderful job. The Korean government, the home delivery companies and the cooperative citizenry are being benchmarked around the world.

If you tell people overseas now that young Koreans call this place Hell Joseon, they don't get it.

Certainly, on the way, there has been misjudgment. There have been mistakes. But what does it say about this society that we now working up our arguments to criminalize them and throw an 89-year-old man behind bars?

*Michael Breen is the author of "The New Koreans" and CEO of Insight Communications*

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