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## **The Shincheonji Paju Case: An open letter to the President of South Korea**

***Scholars and human rights activists protest the scandal of the rental of a park by Shincheonji cancelled at the last minute on a pretext after a slander campaign.***

[Bitter Winter](#) (20.11.2024) - Dear President Yoon Suk Yeol:

We are international scholars of religion and human rights activists concerned with the increasing number of violations of freedom of religion or belief throughout the world. We admire South Korea's rich and vibrant religious heritage and pluralism, and are grateful to the South Korean government for its participation in international efforts denouncing the violations of religious liberty in totalitarian countries.

It is equally important that democratic states do not expose themselves to the criticism that they also violate the international principles of freedom of religion or belief.

We take the liberty of writing to you to express our concern for a recent incident that, in our opinion, has violated the religious liberty of one particular religious group, Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (in short, Shincheonji).

We are aware of the fact that certain South Korean Christian groups consider Shincheonji "heretic." Trading accusations of heresy is as old as religion and of course theological criticism, when it does not degenerate into hate speech and violence, is also protected by religious freedom. It is, however, another matter when religious groups ask democratic states to act as their "secular arm" to limit the liberty of the "heretics."

Shincheonji rented Imjingak Pyeonghwa Nuri Park in Paju for a "Religious Leaders Forum and Graduation Ceremony" from October 29 to 31, 2024. The rental was approved on July 22, and the fee was fully paid on October 2 to the Gyeonggi Tourism Organization. The event was purely religious and non-political. It did not include any planned discussions of issues related to North Korea, and the local authorities were aware of it.

Around 100,000 people were expected to attend, including international guests and dignitaries. Shincheonji reportedly spent about \$7 million on the event.

On October 16, Paju was designated a "danger zone" for potential North Korean propaganda via balloons or drones. On the same day, however, Shincheonji met with local authorities who confirmed their event complied with the "danger zone" regulations.

This was reiterated by Gyeonggi-do authorities on October 23 and 28, who publicly stated they had no plans to cancel the event. A safety review also confirmed Shincheonji's compliance with all regulations.

Meanwhile, fundamentalist Christians submitted a petition to the local authorities, asking them to cancel the event of the "heretic" organization.

On October 29, as the event was set to begin and most attendees had arrived in Paju, Gyeonggi-do Governor Kim Dong-Yeon canceled it, citing concerns it would "provoke North Korea." The North Korean reference was clearly a pretext, as other mass events in Paju were regularly held.

The [U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom](#) and other international religious freedom watchdogs have already denounced discriminations against Shincheonji in South Korea in the past. That these discriminations continue is intolerable in a democratic country.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee in its General Comment no. 22 of July 23, 1993, to article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stated that "Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern 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."

As friends of both South Korea and of freedom of religion or belief, we respectfully ask that the Paju incident be investigated, and measures be taken to prevent any further instances of discrimination against Shincheonji and other minority groups and to compensate Shincheonji for the significant loss suffered because of the unfair treatment received.

November 12, 2024

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## **A scandal in South Korea: Shincheonji's park rental for a mass meeting cancelled at the last minute**

***Under the futile pretext that it may "provoke North Korea," authorities compelled the religious movement to cancel a peaceful event with the expected attendance of 100,000 believers and guests.***

by Alessandro Amicarelli and Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (15.11.2024) - Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (in short, [Shincheonji](#)) is a South Korean Christian [new religious movement](#) that has frequently suffered slander and discrimination at home and abroad. Its members have even been submitted to the [criminal practice of deprogramming](#), and two of them died during violent [deprogramming](#) attempts.

Shincheonji was [falsely accused](#) of violating anti-COVID-19 health regulations, spreading the infection in South Korea. A few anti-cultists, including in Europe, still maintain these

accusations, manipulating the fact that Shincheonji's founder, Chairman Lee Man Hee, apologized and went on his knees (in a very Korean manner) for any mistake his church might have committed. They "forget" to remind their readers, however, that the case was litigated up to the [South Korean Supreme Court](#), which on August 12, 2022, upheld the acquittal of Chairman Lee from all charges that he obstructed the government's response to COVID-19. In fact, the Supreme Court left standing the lower courts' conclusion that not only "there was no evidence of obstruction" of anti-COVID efforts by Shincheonji and Chairman Lee but, when requested, "Shincheonji actively cooperated with the submission of data and promptly provided them to the CDCH [Central Disease Control Headquarters]."

Shincheonji is also accused of "deceptive evangelism," i.e., of inviting potential converts to meetings without revealing the name of the religious group organizing the events. While this strategy derived from the violent slander campaigns against Shincheonji by Christian fundamentalist opponents of "cults," it has been largely abandoned in recent years, as [even anti-cultists have admitted](#). Additionally, the South Korean Supreme Court [held on August 11, 2022](#) (one day before its decision on COVID) that the "covert" evangelism previously practiced by Shincheonji may have deserved a "social" condemnation but was not illegal from the point of view of either civil or criminal law.

Yet, campaigns against Shincheonji continue, fueled by a very active and internationally well-connected [Korean anti-cult movement](#) of Christian (mostly Presbyterian) "heresy hunters." They have even organized a "World Association Against Heresy" which, besides having [some curious connections](#) with China's intelligence services, organizes world tours of Korean pastors denouncing Shincheonji and other groups.

Calling groups successful in proselyting and converting members of one's own church "heretics" is as old as religion. However, in modern democratic states, heretics are no longer denounced to the "secular arm" of the state that burns them at the stake.

The World Association Against Heresy and other fundamentalist Christian Korean-based anti-cult organizations are somewhat nostalgic of the times when states persecuted the heretics on behalf of the majority churches. Denouncing them to the Chinese authorities, as they do, may well lead to their arrest and even execution in China. In democratic countries, they constantly incite the authorities to deny to "heretics" their freedom of religion or belief. In South Korea, it may happen that authorities are intimidated by the fundamentalist Christians' ability to vote as a bloc and influence elections and do cooperate in the punishment of the "heretics," something that should be inconceivable in a democratic state.

A case in point is Shincheonji. Undaunted by the court defeats they have encountered on the COVID and "covert evangelism" issues, anti-cultists and authorities have found a new devious way of violating the [human rights](#) of Shincheonji devotees. Their events are prohibited with the pretext that they may "provoke North Korea" and exacerbate the present heated confrontation between the Seoul and Pyongyang governments.

Shincheonji proudly insists on the fact that it is the only religion that is not joined by baptism but by passing an examination (which is by no means easy or merely formal). Those who want to join Shincheonji study its doctrines for several months and then submit to the examination. For those who pass it, the Graduation Ceremony is a solemn event.

Shincheonji rented the Imjingak Pyeonghwa Nuri Park in Paju, Gyeonggi-do, from October 29 to 31, 2024, planning to hold there a "Religious Leaders Forum and Graduation Ceremony" on the 30. The rental was approved by the local authorities on July 22. Shincheonji paid the corresponding fee in advance and in full on October 2 to the Gyeonggi Tourism Organization. Some 100,000 persons were expected to attend. Many had come from abroad, including guests and dignitaries. Shincheonji claims to have spent some US \$7 million for organizing the event.

On October 16, the city of Paju was designated a "danger zone" for the possible distribution of North Korean propaganda through balloons or drones. On the same day, however, Shincheonji held a meeting with local authorities, who told them that nothing in the program of its event was incompatible with the "danger zone" regulations. This was publicly confirmed on October 23 and 28 by the Gyeonggi-do authorities, who denied having any intention to cancel the event. A safety review was completed and confirmed Shincheonji had complied with all the safety regulations too.

Meanwhile, the fundamentalist Christian "heresy hunters" submitted a petition to the local authorities, asking them to cancel the event of the "heretic" organization.

On October 29, when the rental should have commenced and most participants to the event had already arrived in Paju, the Governor of Gyeonggi-do, Kim Dong-Yeon, stated that the event would "provoke North Korea" and ordered it cancelled.

That the reference to North Korea was just a pretext is proved by the fact that other mass events in Paju were regularly held. Shincheonji's forum and Graduation Ceremony did not include any planned reference to North Korea and the authorities were aware of it.

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that by using a pretext the Gyeonggi-do authorities simply wanted to humor the Christian fundamentalist "heresy hunters" who, disagreeable as they may be, carry a specific weight in South Korean elections. They effectively used the local government as a "secular harm" to punish the heretics and prevent their exercise of their freedom of religion or belief.

The [U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom](#) had already denounced discriminations against Shincheonji originating from the COVID incidents. These discriminations continue, and are intolerable in a democratic country. Friends of freedom of religion or belief should publicly denounce both the Paju incident and the persistent Korean and international campaigns of slander against Shincheonji.

The public authorities responsible for this incident should at least apologize to Shincheonji and compensate it for the significant loss it suffered because of the unfair treatment received, both financially and in terms of reputation in South Korea and beyond.

### **More reading**

[\*\*HRWF Report : Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea \(2020\)\*\*](#)