

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

Dear President Moon:

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

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.

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 hosts 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 by 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.

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.

Other groups are targeted too, but we are particularly concerned about members of Shincheonji, which reports 1,287 deprogrammings since 2003. Two members of Shincheonji, Ms Sun Hwa-kim in 2007 and Ms Gu Ji-in in 2017 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 due to natural causes, but co-religionists believe otherwise.

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.

Deprogramming is also supported by hate speech going well beyond the normal boundaries of religious controversy and de-humanizing 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.

Dear President Moon, we ask your personal 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. The international reputation of South Korea would certainly benefit from prompt action.