



General Assembly

Distr.: General
XX August 2026

English only

Human Rights Council

Sixty-third session

7 September–9 October 2026

Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[5 August 2026]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

The Detention of Chairman Lee Man-hee in South Korea

Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience (CAP-LC) submits this written statement to the Human Rights Council to express concern regarding the detention of Chairman Lee Man-hee, the ninety-five-year-old leader of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the Republic of Korea. CAP-LC has monitored the situation closely and considers that recent developments raise significant questions about the protection of elderly defendants, the interpretation of constitutional principles, and the broader implications for freedom of religion or belief.

Chairman Lee is being held in custody despite his advanced age and the non-violent nature of the allegations. The charges relate to political participation by members of his religious community. They do not involve threats to public safety, risks of flight, or conduct that would normally justify the incarceration of a defendant approaching one hundred years of age. The image of a frail religious leader being taken into detention has generated widespread concern among observers of the Korean justice system.

The accusations focus on claims that members of Shincheonji were encouraged to take part in internal political party procedures. Participation in political life is a right enjoyed by all citizens under international human rights law. The suggestion that religious believers should refrain from political engagement contradicts established democratic practice and raises questions about how the principle of separation of religion and state is interpreted. This principle protects institutions from undue interference; it does not require religious individuals to abstain from civic participation.

Statements made by public authorities have intensified these concerns. Remarks by the Minister of Justice describing criminal punishment of Chairman Lee as the “inevitable” consequence of his being a “false prophet” were issued while investigations were still ongoing. Such declarations risk undermining the presumption of innocence and may influence public perception of a case that has not yet been adjudicated. Authorities responsible for the justice system should avoid comments that appear to prejudge outcomes or diminish the impartiality of judicial proceedings.

The situation is further complicated by references to foreign cases that have been inaccurately described. Public statements in Korea praising the dissolution of a religious organization in Japan have cited political ties as a justification, although the relevant judicial decision does not mention such elements. Mischaracterizing foreign jurisprudence is problematic when domestic legislative initiatives are being considered that may affect the legal status of religious bodies. Accuracy is essential when discussing measures that could have far-reaching consequences for freedom of religion or belief.

Chairman Lee’s age raises special concerns. International human rights standards emphasize that pre-trial detention should be used only when strictly necessary and that the health and vulnerability of defendants must be taken into account. The Human Rights Council has repeatedly affirmed that states should adopt measures ensuring that elderly persons are treated with dignity and detained only in exceptional cases. The continued incarceration of a ninety-five-year-old man for non-violent allegations requires careful scrutiny.

South Korea has long been recognized for its commitment to democratic values and human rights. This reputation is strengthened when institutions demonstrate restraint, proportionality, and respect for fundamental freedoms. The treatment of religious minorities is an important indicator of this commitment. Ensuring that elderly defendants are not subjected to unnecessary hardship is equally essential.

CAP-LC respectfully urges the Government of the Republic of Korea to review the necessity of Chairman Lee’s continued detention in light of his age, health, and the nature of the allegations. Judicial proceedings should be conducted with full respect for the

presumption of innocence, and public authorities should refrain from statements that may compromise the appearance of impartiality. Legislative or administrative measures affecting religious organizations should be based on accurate information and should comply with international standards on freedom of religion or belief.

The Human Rights Council has emphasized that states must protect vulnerable individuals and ensure that legal processes do not become instruments of discrimination. The case of Chairman Lee offers an opportunity for the Republic of Korea to reaffirm its commitment to human dignity, due process, and the rights of all citizens, including older people and those in minority religious communities.
