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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.

[19 January 2026]

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

Threatened Dissolution of Shincheonji and Other Religious Organizations in the Republic of Korea

The President of the Republic of Korea, Lee Jae Myung, as reported in Korean and international media, has threatened to pursue the legal dissolution of religious organizations in his country, including the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony ("Shincheonji"). According to the President's spokesperson, on January 12, 2026, he met with leaders of majority religions, who told him that "The damage caused by pseudo-cult religions like the Unification Church and Shincheonji is severe," that "Dissolving religious groups that harm the nation and its people would likely gain public consensus," and added, "We ask the government to consider using the assets of problematic religious foundations to support victims of pseudo-religions." Reportedly, the President replied that "the harm to our society [caused by these 'pseudo-cult religions'] has been neglected for too long, leading to enormous damage" ("The Chosun Daily," January 13, 2026, https://bit.ly/4bgztKj).

Another newspaper reported that "President Lee Jae Myung voiced his agreement with religious leaders' calls to disband the Unification Church, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus and other 'illegitimate, heretical religious organizations'" ("The Korea Times," January 12, 2026, https://bit.ly/3LLy8k5).

Echoing the President, Prime Minister Kim Min-seok stated that "Pseudo-religions are social evils that need to be eradicated," and added, "Together with a thorough joint investigation into the Unification Church, Shincheonji and other groups, I would like all ministries to explore ways to eradicate the evils of pseudo-religions in their respective fields" ("Yonhap News," January 13, 2026, https://bit.ly/4jEu41t).

The Korean authorities have cited Japan's precedent, where a first-degree decision in March 2025 dissolved the Unification Church (now the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) as a religious organization. Apparently, they are not aware that the Tokyo District Court's decision was criticized in a statement of October 3, 2025, by four UN Special Rapporteurs—Nazila Ghanea (freedom of religion or belief), Nicolas Levrat (minority issues), Farida Shaheed (right to education), and Gina Romero (rights of children)—as "based on civil tort judgments that invoked the vague concept of 'public welfare'" (https://bit.ly/4jAAJtw). The Rapporteurs noted that "The civil tort rulings on which the dissolution decision was based rely on the violation of 'social appropriateness' which were deemed to constitute a serious harm to 'public welfare.' As previously noted by the Human Rights Committee, the concept of 'public welfare' is vague and open-ended and may permit restrictions exceeding those permissible under the ICCPR."

The statement emphasized that "any restrictions on the exercise of Article 18 rights must comply strictly with the limitations set out in Article 18.3 of the ICCPR, as interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee."

This principle applies equally to the Republic of Korea, where the violation of Article 18 of the ICCPR appears even more blatant than in Japan.

In Japan, the dissolution of the Unification Church was based on allegations of excessive pressure to solicit donations (although the court acknowledged that such cases had become rarer in recent years). In Korea, the arguments invoked for dissolution do not focus on donations.

This statement presents the case of Shincheonji, while noting that the issue is broader and may potentially affect dozens of religious organizations. What, precisely, is Shincheonji accused of?

We note with concern the repeated references to Shincheonji and other groups as "heretical religious organizations," "pseudo-religions," and "pseudo-cult religions." Such terminology

is clearly impermissible under Article 18 of the ICCPR. Governments cannot act as theological arbiters deciding which religions are "true" or "pseudo," nor can they initiate witch hunts against "heretics." It is troubling that President Lee discussed dissolving "heretical" organizations with leaders of mainline churches—institutions that have long viewed Shincheonji and other new religions as competitors guilty of promoting non-conventional ("heretical") theologies and "stealing their sheep" by converting their members. While accusations of heresy are as old as religion itself, we had hoped that witch hunts belonged to a distant past and certainly would not be encouraged by the presidents of democratic nations.

President Lee claims that Shincheonji and others have caused "enormous damage." Where is the evidence? Shincheonji is currently being investigated for alleged violations of the ROK's electoral law, specifically for counseling its devotees to join political parties and support specific candidates. These allegations must, of course, be proven. They involve several religious organizations and clergy. Although technically illegal in the ROK, political involvement by religious actors has typically been punished with small fines and certainly does not justify the draconian measure of dissolution. Recent public commentary in Korea also appears to question the right of all citizens—including members of minority religions—to participate freely in political life.

Although the President did not explicitly address these accusations, some media have revived old claims that Shincheonji spread COVID-19 by disregarding sanitary measures or that it caused harm through deceptive evangelism. However, Shincheonji's leader was found not guilty of any COVID-related offenses in the first degree by the Suwon District Court on January 13, 2021, on appeal by the Suwon High Court on November 30, 2021, and finally by the Supreme Court on August 12, 2022. It became clear that the accusations were false. The Supreme Court upheld the lower courts' conclusion that "there was no evidence of obstruction" of anti-COVID efforts by Shincheonji. On the contrary, after an agreement with the authorities on the lists of members to be submitted, "Shincheonji actively cooperated with the submission of data and promptly provided them to the CDCH [Central Disease Control Headquarters]."

"Deceptive" evangelization refers to proselytization conducted without initially using the name Shincheonji. The movement argues that this was necessary due to media slander campaigns. The Supreme Court, on August 11, 2022—one day before it decided on COVID—declared that "covered" evangelism as practiced by Shincheonji may perhaps be regarded as "deserving social or ethical condemnation," but lacks the "coercive element" that would make it illegal. The issue is now moot, as Shincheonji has shifted from "covered" to "open" evangelism and uses its name openly. Even regarding past practices, the Supreme Court closed a window through which theories of "brainwashing"—discredited and unanimously rejected by mainline scholars of new religious movements—had attempted to re-enter legal discourse and be used to discriminate against minority religions.

Apart from alleged violations of electoral law, there is no evidence whatsoever that Shincheonji caused "enormous damage" to Korean society. Perhaps it caused damage to mainline Christian denominations by converting some of their members. But, as the Supreme Court reiterated in its August 11, 2022, decision, "Freedom of religion includes the freedom of mission to promote one's religion and gather new believers, and the freedom of mission includes freedom to criticize other religions or to encourage conversion of believers of other religions." This is entirely consistent with the ICCPR and applies equally to all religions—traditional or new, popular or unpopular.

The anti-heresy witch hunt, once the domain of Christian fundamentalists and now seemingly embraced by the President, is incompatible with Korea's obligation to respect religious liberty under the ICCPR.

CAP LC urges the Republic of Korea to uphold freedom of religion or belief and to renounce plans to dissolve Shincheonji and other religious organizations whose principal

"offense" is their success, perceived as unwelcome competition by other denominations and churches.