

Issue Brief: Pretrial Detention of Mr. Lee Man-hee (Republic of Korea)

REQUEST FOR INDEPENDENT HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW | PREPARED BY JUSTIN CHEW | UPDATED 12 JULY 2026 | 2 PAGES

1. Summary of concern

Mr. Lee Man-hee, the 95-year-old chairman of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, was arrested in late June 2026 and is being held in pretrial detention in South Korea on charges under the Political Parties Act and of obstruction of business — alleged non-violent offences. A petition for review of the legality of his detention was dismissed on 28 June 2026; he was indicted the following day and remains detained pending trial. This brief does not contest that the allegations should be examined through the proper legal process. The concern is narrower: whether it is necessary, proportionate, and humane to hold a 95-year-old man with serious health needs in pretrial detention pending trial, when less restrictive alternatives appear available, and whether the case merits independent review before irreversible harm is done.

Transparency: The author has studied and subscribes to the teachings of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, and states this openly so the perspective is clear. The factual claims in this brief are drawn from independent, publicly available sources — news reporting, court filings, and UN human rights instruments — and can be verified independently of that perspective. This brief does not ask any reader to defend Shincheonji, endorse its beliefs, or take a position on the merits of the criminal case — only to assess whether the detention itself raises legitimate human rights questions.

2. Key facts and chronology (as reported; allegations distinguished from established facts)

Jan–May 2026 — A joint prosecutor–police task force investigates alleged links between religious groups and politics; searches of Shincheonji facilities reportedly seize membership records and electronic data (Yonhap; ABC/AP).

4 June 2026 — Mr. Lee appears voluntarily for questioning as a suspect. He denies the allegations during questioning (Yonhap; Korea JoongAng Daily).

22 June 2026 — Prosecutors apply for an arrest warrant, alleging Political Parties Act violations and obstruction of business. The allegation that *at least* 56,472 members were enrolled in the People Power Party (July 2021–January 2024) — reportedly organised under an internal code name investigators call the "Pilates project" — is the prosecution's allegation and has not been judicially determined (Yonhap; Korea Times).

24 June 2026 — The Seoul Central District Court holds a warrant hearing; Mr. Lee appears with assistance because of his advanced age, and his counsel argue he complied faithfully with all summonses and poses no flight risk. The court grants the warrant, citing risk of evidence destruction; the full written detention order has not been publicly released (Reuters; SBS News).

28 June 2026 — Mr. Lee files a petition for review of the legality of his detention; the court dismisses it the same day (Asia Economy). This avenue of domestic challenge has thus been attempted and rejected at this stage.

29 June 2026 — Prosecutors indict him while detained, stating charges nearing the statute of limitations were prioritised while the broader investigation continues (Korea JoongAng Daily; Yonhap). No trial judgment exists; there has been no conviction or acquittal.

29 June 2026 Established — The Minister of Justice, Jeong Seong-ho, publishes a statement on his official Facebook account addressing the case, describing it as a serious crime for which "strict criminal punishment commensurate with the responsibility is inevitable," and closing with a quotation of Matthew 7:15 ("Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves"). This is a documented public statement by the official who oversees the prosecution system (Jeong Seong-ho, official Facebook account, 29 June 2026; reported by Newsis and Kukmin Ilbo, 30 June 2026).

A petition prepared for court submission states he requires daily medical assistance and ongoing healthcare, warns prolonged detention could cause irreversible harm, and notes his fixed residence and established social foundation. He is 95 (born 1931) and publicly known, with a long record of open engagement.

3. Why the detention raises human rights questions

Under ICCPR Article 9 and the UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 35, pretrial detention must be the exception, based on an individualized determination that it is reasonable and necessary; UN standards (including the Tokyo Rules) require genuine consideration of non-custodial alternatives. The reported facts present a direct tension: a defendant with a fixed residence, a public profile, serious documented health needs, and reported cooperation with investigators is nonetheless detained on a generalized ground (possible evidence destruction). A domestic detention-legality review was dismissed within a day on 28 June 2026, and the full written reasoning of the detention order has not been publicly released — limiting visibility into whether the required individualized assessment occurred. The question an independent reviewer is best placed to answer is:

What specific and individualized reason makes detention necessary for a cooperating 95-year-old, instead of less restrictive alternatives such as residence restrictions or conditions of supervision?

Separately, the Nelson Mandela Rules require detention conditions and healthcare adequate to a detainee's needs. For a 95-year-old requiring daily medical assistance, any period of pretrial detention carries an elevated risk that harm becomes irreversible before trial — engaging the humane-treatment obligations that exist independently of guilt or innocence.

A further question concerns the presumption of innocence and state neutrality toward religion. On 29 June 2026, the Minister of Justice — who oversees the prosecution system — publicly stated that "strict criminal punishment... is inevitable" as proceedings began, and characterised the case using scripture. Such a statement by a senior official may be read as prejudging an outcome no court has determined, and its use of religious language in respect of a religious-minority defendant raises questions about impartiality that an independent observer may wish to assess. This brief takes no position on how those questions should be resolved; it notes the statement so it can be evaluated on its own terms.

4. Relevant history: the COVID-19 prosecution

During the COVID-19 period, Mr. Lee and Shincheonji were intensely blamed in public discourse for the spread of the virus in South Korea. Mr. Lee was prosecuted for allegedly obstructing the government's pandemic response. He was acquitted of the obstruction charge at trial and on appeal, and South Korea's Supreme Court upheld that acquittal on 12 August 2022 (Korea Herald; Korea Times). (For completeness: in the same case he received a suspended sentence on separate charges unrelated to the public-health allegations.)

This history is not offered as proof that anything improper is occurring now. It is offered because it shows that, once before, intense public stigma toward this community coincided with criminal allegations against its leader that ultimately did not withstand judicial scrutiny on the central charge. The question it raises:

When a minority religious community has already been publicly stigmatized, is the risk that public pressure colours prosecutorial and detention decisions serious enough to warrant independent review — before, not after, irreversible harm to a 95-year-old detainee?

5. Wider public interest

Beyond one individual, the case raises questions about how unpopular religious minorities are treated where criminal proceedings intersect with public stigma, political participation, and state neutrality toward religion. Because the allegations concern political-party membership and civic participation by members of a religious minority, the case also touches standards on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of association, equality before the law, and participation in public affairs. Independent review could clarify the rule-of-law principles at stake for minority communities generally.

6. Questions suggested for independent review

- Does the detention satisfy the ICCPR Art. 9 requirements of necessity, reasonableness, and individualized justification, given the reported cooperation, fixed residence, and health condition?
- Were less restrictive alternatives genuinely considered, consistent with the Tokyo Rules?
- Are detention conditions and medical care adequate for a 95-year-old requiring daily medical assistance (Nelson Mandela Rules), and can his right to prepare a defence be effectively exercised from detention?
- Do public statements by senior officials as proceedings begin raise concerns under the presumption of innocence and the state's duty of religious neutrality?
- Is there a pattern of disparate treatment connected to the defendant's religious community that warrants attention under freedom of religion or belief and equality standards?

7. What is being asked

At this stage: not a public statement. A conversation (15 minutes), an initial view on whether this falls within your mandate, or a referral to a more appropriate person, organisation, or mechanism. Documentation — including the court-submission petition and press reporting — can be provided on request.

8. Sources

Yonhap News (English) — questioning (4 Jun), warrant application and allegations incl. the "at least 56,472" figure (22–24 Jun), indictment (29 Jun): en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260604007000315; [AEN20260622004952315](https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260622004952315); [AEN20260629010400320](https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260629010400320)

Reuters — arrest and warrant hearing: reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-arrests-shincheonji-church-leader-meddling-politics-media-report-2026-06-24/

Asia Economy (English) — detention legality review dismissed (28 Jun): asiae.co.kr/en/article/2026062817164636079

Korea JoongAng Daily — indictment; denial at questioning: koreajoongangdaily.com/korea/shincheonji-leader-indicted-for-violating-political-parties-act/12746492

Korea Times — prosecution allegations; statute-of-limitations: koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/law-crime/20260629/

SBS News (English) — court's stated grounds; cane/cooperation: news.sbs.co.kr/english/article.do?news_id=N1008626551

Newsis; Kukmin Ilbo — Minister of Justice's public statement (30 Jun): newsis.com/view/NISX20260630_0003689300; kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0030042168

Jeong Seong-ho — Minister of Justice, official Facebook account, statement of 29 Jun 2026: facebook.com/JungSungho1

Korea Herald / Korea Times — Supreme Court upholds acquittal on COVID-obstruction charge (12 Aug 2022)

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I would be grateful for any guidance on how this matter can be independently assessed before further harm is done.