

South Korea's Covid-19 Crisis: A Work of a Millennial Sect?

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The abrupt, huge explosion of Covid-19 contagion gave a tremendous shock to all South Koreans except for a minority millennial sect. On the first day of March, the number has rapidly grown to over 3,700, with 20 deaths, a huge increase compared with less than a hundred two weeks ago.

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Out of this, over 60 per cent is related to just one group of people. What is this religious sect? It is called the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Shincheonji means New Heaven and Earth in Korean, implying a millennial Christian utopia. And its leader Lee Man-hee controls this monolithic organism from top to bottom.

Millennial sect invokes an explosive outbreak

Very recently, the *Guardian* reported the story under the title: 'We're treated like criminals': South Korean sect feels coronavirus backlash in South Korea. In this article, the Shincheonji sect sounded like innocent victims of a witch hunt.

However, the story is totally different. The Shincheonji sect is not a victim, but a key super vector of the virus. Its ignorance, stubbornness and religiosity greatly contributed to the explosive spread of the virus. Rather, the citizens of Daegu, an epicenter of the outbreak, are the innocent victims. Shincheonji members played a key role in this unprecedented virus explosion by holding a large religious gathering, extremely vulnerable to a virus spread.

Under enormous pressure from public opinion, as well as the government's request, the Shincheonji sect's leadership was finally forced to provide the list of their membership, the correctness of which is still dubious. As a secret religious sect, it runs an extremely centralized clandestine organization under its supreme leader, who is regarded as a resurrected Jesus by rank and file members. And one of its priorities is to keep maximum secrecy. Further mounting pressure and critiques forced the sect to provide another list of about 90,000 members-in-training.

However, the Shincheonji sect never gave any public apology nor any candid statement acknowledging its responsibility. Instead, their official statement says, "A storm is depriving us of our faith", alluding to the outbreak of the virus as a sort of conspiracy or punishment of God.

The sect is for now highly defensive, attempting every effort to keep secret as much information of

its organization and members as possible. Because in spite of its reluctant cooperation with the authorities, much is still in mystery. For instance, in January, Lee Man-hee's old brother died at a hospital in hardly known Cheongdo County, not far from Daegu, another epicentre of the virus outbreak. That he might have been infected and his death caused by the virus, the Shincheonji sect refuses to tell the truth. Lots of Shincheonji leaders visited the hospital and attended the funeral there.

Furthermore, it concealed the important fact that it operated a branch in Wuhan, mainland China, which is one of the key centres of Shincheonji's missionary activities in China. Its English website had boasted of this, but after a massive outbreak, the information disappeared from its website.

Even before this case, Shincheonji has had such notoriety that they mostly reveal their religious identity in everyday lives and that in attracting believers, they don't mention the name of their church until the members-in-training turn into firm sectarians. In addition to these strange behaviours, rank and file members are constantly imposed with the strictest disciplines and financial sacrifice. Based on these missions and activities, Shincheonji has built a sectarian empire, a huge network of open and clandestine churches and meeting places, both nationally and internationally.

Besides religious and missionary activities, Shincheonji owns a number of unknown expensive assets, like buildings and real estate only known by Lee Man-hee and his close assistants. Also in order to defend illegally obtained assets and fight back possible attacks on the group, Shincheonji has developed a broad network of defense and lobbying, giving bribes to a range of politicians and public officials. Inside the mindset of the Shincheonji sect, all the possible methods, legal or illegal, are permitted because they are chosen people and justified to do anything to please God or their supreme leader Lee Man-hee.

More than Shincheonji

Last weekend, though the government discouraged holding any crowded rallies, extreme rightwing Christians held a thousand-strong rally at Gwanghwamoon Square, downtown Seoul, in front of the national government buildings and the US Embassy. A fanatic Protestant pastor, Jeon Gwanghoon, made his usual anti-government speech, ridiculing the fear of the corona virus, and even saying that the virus is no problem at all and God will cure those who attended the rally.

Despite the government's request to call off services in churches and temples, and instead do the services online, many Protestant churches continue to carry out services for churchgoers. Though a few minsters have caught the corona virus, many Protestant leaders insist on keeping their own way, while the Catholic churches and Buddhist temples have cancelled all mass services completely.

Many ultra-conservative Christians have been the main bulwark against the Moon Jae-in government, and they are still angry with the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, demanding her release from prison, while her trials are still going on.

These Christians, with other reactionary extremists, launched an online petition campaign for the impeachment of President Moon Jae-in, collecting more than 1 million signatures. And they enjoy the freedom of speech to spread all kinds of fake news full of hate and untruth.

These heretic sects are fairly widely spread across the society, and the news reports of fraud, extortion, threats and even violence by numerous similar sects are repeatedly made. For instance, in the tragic Sewol ferry accident, the shipping company was owned by another religious sect, Salvationists or officially Christian Gospel Baptists. Lyu Byeong-eon died mysteriously while being

hunted by police. And Park Geun-hye was deeply involved with an alleged pastor Choi Tae-min, father of Park's accomplice Choi Soon-shil.

The worst impact of these millennial sects or religious extremism is that the lives of entrapped victims are totally destroyed, and many of them go bankrupt after devoting all that they have to sects. While the religious sects keep a huge amount of buildings and land, those still within sects live like slaves and those luckily out of them face the harsh reality of being penniless.

The problem is more than anger against the Shincheonji sect

This unexpected explosion deepened the Covid-19 crisis all over society. The crisis is a bastion for hate speech and racist and chauvinist phobias. Some extreme nationalists insist on implementing the ban on the entry of any ethnic Chinese, though actually the government has already banned the entry of the Chinese from Wuhan and the neighboring area.

However, another real danger persists. That is, in the course of fighting the corona virus, we are daily observing an actual 1984 totalitarianism. While many South Koreans recognize the inevitability of unusual emergency measures, which possibly encroach personal freedom, the government activated a mechanism of total surveillance in the investigation of potential patients, by freely using their personal information, which, without any restrictions, are provided by mobile phone companies and internet or SNS service providers.

Now the situation is still uncertain and volatile, and thus, it is difficult to hope for any prompt end of this catastrophe in the coming days or weeks. In this natural disaster, reactionary extremists, as well as religious fanatics, are dominant in forming public opinion, though their actual influence is rather limited.

Again, this monstrous sect Shincheonji is still refusing any responsibility, instead appealing to stop a witch hunt against them. This unprecedented medical crisis of Covid-19 virus has exposed extremely ugly faces of reactionary religious sectarianism and the dismal dystopia of South Korea's vulgar capitalism in the 21st century.

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Today, on March 2nd, while the number of the virus patient hiked to 4,335, the leader of Shincheonji sect, Lee Man-hee, formally made a very overdue public apology, of which his sincerity is still in question since he evaded to tell the whole truth.
