

ARGUMENT

Cults and Conservatives Spread Coronavirus in South Korea

Seoul seemed to have the virus under control. But religion and politics have derailed plans.

BY S. NATHAN PARK | FEBRUARY 27, 2020, 10:45 AM

South Korea initially seemed to have the COVID-19 epidemic under control, armed with efficient bureaucracy and state-of-the-art technology. However, since Feb. 18, the number of coronavirus cases in South Korea has exploded to more than 1,700 as of Thursday. The battle plan against the epidemic was derailed by the oldest of problems: religion and politics.

When it came to preparation, it helped that South Korea had one hell of a practice run: the MERS outbreak in 2015 that caused 38 deaths. At the time, the incompetent response by the conservative administration of then President Park Geun-hye put South Korea in the ignominious position of having the greatest number of cases outside of the Middle East. The fallout, which contributed to the public distrust of government that culminated in Park's impeachment and removal, pushed the South Korean government to significantly revamp its preparation for the next viral event.

South Korea has been preparing for a potential new strain of coronavirus since as early as November 2019. Without knowing what virus would hit the country next, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) devised an ingenious method of testing for any type of coronavirus and eliminating known strains of coronavirus such as SARS or MERS to isolate the new variant of coronavirus.

For the first four weeks of the outbreak, South Korea marshaled high-tech resources to respond aggressively while promoting transparency. The government tracked the movements of travelers arriving from China, for example by tracking the use of credit cards, checking CCTV footage, or mandating they download an app to report their health status every day. For those infected, the government published an extremely detailed list of their whereabouts, down to which seat they sat in at a movie theater.

The info was also presented (with names removed) in an interactive website that allows the public to trace the movement of every single individual with coronavirus. To be sure, there were real privacy concerns—as when one unfortunate patient in Daejeon had news of their visit to a risqué lingerie store blasted to every smartphone in their city. Yet on balance, these disclosures did much to calm the nerves and prevent unnecessary panic in the population. By Feb. 17, South Korea's tally of COVID-19 patients stood at 30, with zero deaths. Ten patients were fully cured and discharged, with some of the discharged patients declaring the disease was “not something as serious as one might think.” The government seemed ready to declare victory.

That all came to a crashing halt last week thanks to the 31st case. Patient No. 31, discovered on Feb. 18, was a member of a quasi-Christian cult called Shincheonji, one of the many new religious movements in the country. Founded in 1984, Shincheonji (whose official name is Shincheonji, Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony) means “new heaven and earth,” a reference to the Book of Revelation. Its founder Lee Man-hee claims to be the second coming of Jesus who is to establish the “new spiritual Israel” at the end of days. The cult is estimated to have approximately 240,000 followers, and claims to have outposts in 29 countries in addition to South Korea.

Shincheonji's bad theology makes for worse public health. Shincheonji teaches illness is a sin, encouraging its followers to suffer through diseases to attend services in which they sit closely together, breathing in spittle as they repeatedly amen in unison. If they were off on their own, that might be one thing—but according to Shin Hyeon-uk, a pastor who formerly belonged to the cult, Shincheonji believes in “deceptive proselytizing,” approaching potential converts without disclosing their denomination. Shincheonji convinces its members to cover their tracks, providing a prearranged set of answers to give when anyone asks if they belong to the cult. Often, even family members are in the dark about whether someone is a Shincheonji follower. The net effect is that Shincheonji followers infect each other easily, then go on to infect the community at large.

It is not yet clear exactly how Shincheonji cultists were infected with COVID-19 in the first instance. (KCDC said Patient No. 31 is likely not the first Shincheonji follower to be infected, given the timeline of her symptoms.) Although investigations are still pending, South Korean authorities have been focusing on the funeral of the brother of Shincheonji's founder held in early February. Shincheonji has 19 churches in China, including in Wuhan, and it may be possible that followers from around the world attended the funeral.

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The infected Shincheonji members then spread coronavirus by sharing closed-off spaces, refusing to be quarantined, and hiding their membership. Although Patient No. 31 ran a high fever, she attended two Shincheonji services **which held** more than a thousand worshippers each, in addition to **attending** a wedding and a conference for a pyramid scheme. She **visited** a clinic after being involved in a minor traffic accident, but ignored the repeated recommendations by the doctors to receive testing for COVID-19. In other cases, a self-identified Shincheonji follower who came to a hospital complaining of high fever **ran off** during examination when the doctors informed her she may be quarantined. One woman who donated her liver to her mother for transplant **belatedly admitted** she belonged to Shincheonji when her fever would not drop after the surgery. (Both cases led to a temporary shutdown of the hospitals involved, making the public health response to the coronavirus that much more difficult.) In a tragicomic instance, one of the Daegu city officials in charge of infectious disease control **was revealed** to be a Shincheonji follower only after a diagnosis confirmed he was infected with coronavirus.

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Since the discovery of Patient No. 31, the number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea jumped from 30 to 977 in eight days. Nearly all of the new cases are Shincheonji followers, or traceable to them. Particularly tragic is the case of Cheongdo Daenam Hospital, where the funeral for Lee Man-hee's brother was held. This hospital alone saw 114 cases, most of whom were long-term psychiatric patients. Because these patients never left the hospital, much less traveled abroad, they were not tested early for coronavirus, nor were they properly quarantined. This led to an advanced stage of the disease among many of the psychiatric patients, **resulting in** seven out of the 12 coronavirus deaths thus far.

The cult isn't the only ideology helping push the virus forward. Conservatives, still recovering from Park Geun-hye's impeachment and removal in 2017, have held large-scale rallies in the middle of Seoul each week for months. Even as large corporations are advising their employees to work remotely and people are canceling meetings, these conservative groups—largely made up of a high-risk older population—continue to hold rallies, cavalierly **ignoring** the Seoul government's advisory to the contrary. Shouting down Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon's plea to stop the rally, the conservative group leader and pastor **Jeon Gwang-hun** implausibly **claimed** it was impossible to contract coronavirus outdoors, while those attending claimed "God was making the wind blow to drive out the virus."

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The more well-heeled South Korean conservatives, in the legislative halls or at the editorial desk, are not much more a help. Since the outbreak began, South Korea's conservatives have been a broken record, demanding over and over again that the government place a complete travel ban against China. United Future Party chairman Hwang Gyo-ahn **said** on Feb. 24: "We once again strongly urge a ban on travel from China. That is virtually the only available response." On the same day, the right-leaning newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo* made the extraordinary move of putting its editorial at the top of the front page titled: "Implement Total Ban of Foreigners Entering from China Now." (Apparently with no sense of irony, *JoongAng Ilbo* ran a large story immediately below the editorial complaining of the "Koreaphobia" displayed by the Israeli government when it turned away Korean tourists visiting Jerusalem.)

It is a cynical attack that is both red-baiting and race-baiting. Since the election of the liberal President Moon Jae-in, one of the conservatives' major attack points has been that Moon was too soft on China's Communist government. With COVID-19, South Korea's conservative politicians found a neat way to connect this point with the viral outbreak originating from China: Moon is too afraid of China to shut down travel from China. This line of attack also whips up xenophobia against ethnic Chinese immigrants to South Korea, a convenient target, as South Korea is holding legislative elections in April.

To remind the public of the connection between the coronavirus and China, South Korea's conservative politicians and press **persist** in calling the viral disease "Wuhan pneumonia" or "Wuhan corona" in lieu of the official name. The United Future Party went so far as to hold up the formation of a special legislative committee for COVID-19 response because it opposed any committee that did not have the word "Wuhan" in the name. (The United Future Party finally **relented** on Feb. 26, allowing the committee to form.) All this comes despite the proven failure of travel bans and **experts' consensus** against them—not to mention that there was no crossover between Shincheonji and ethnically Chinese areas. As if to illustrate the point, United Future Party leadership, including parliamentary leader Shim Jae-cheol, was briefly **quarantined** following a large meeting with the Korean Federation of Teachers' Associations to criticize the Moon administration's education policy, as the president of the association was infected with COVID-19. (The association's president apparently was infected through his wife, who **met with** a Shincheonji follower.)

And yet, the government is carrying on. Despite the sudden explosion of cases, South Korea is in the rare position of having an effective means of detecting the disease and the transparency to report the results accurately. The seeming explosion compared to other countries may be a matter of testing as well as contamination. Thus far, KCDC has administered more than 40,000 tests for coronavirus, and more than 7,500 coronavirus tests a day with an eye toward being able to test more than 10,000 a day by the end of February. (In contrast, the United States has tested fewer than 500 people.)

Unlike the draconian quarantine measures implemented in China, the city of Daegu is still open for business, [trusting](#) its citizens to take adequate precautions. The Moon administration's efforts to respond to the outbreak has been earning high marks overall, with a [recent survey](#) showing 64 percent approval in the government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Moon visited Daegu on Feb. 25, [urging](#) for a "clear inflection point within this week" in the number of cases. As the virus spreads worldwide, South Korea's response may serve as a model for how a high-tech liberal democracy can respond to a global pandemic that pressures the weakest points of society.

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