

# **In the shadow of freedom of religion and press: How Christian fundamentalism and conservative media have undermined the public health authority's COVID-19 mitigation and vaccination strategies in Korea?**

Hee-Young Shin (PhD)

Associate Professor of Economics

Raj Soin College of Business, Wright State University

Email: [HeeYoung.Shin@wright.edu](mailto:HeeYoung.Shin@wright.edu)

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## **Abstract:**

The Korean government's non-pharmaceutical interventions to the COVID-19 epidemic have successfully lowered the number of infected patients and the overall mortality rate. Nonetheless, the public health authority's various mitigation strategies and vaccination efforts have faced several challenges posed by politically motivated Christian fundamentalism and ultraconservative mainstream media. This paper examines how these conservative forces – both religious and political – have undermined the public health authority's various mitigation efforts and discusses how to address the problems from a public policy point of view. The paper argues that a comprehensive legal reform including the introduction of effective punitive damages in the media market is a necessary minimum to address some of these problems.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, non-pharmaceutical interventions, Christian fundamentalism, ultraconservative mass media, fake news, media market reform, South Korea.

# **In the shadow of freedom of religion and press: How Christian fundamentalism and conservative media have undermined the public health authority's COVID-19 mitigation and vaccination strategies in Korea?**

## **1. Introduction**

The South Korean ('Korean' hereafter) government's public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely praised by many public health experts around the world. The government's rapid support for the development and deployment of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) test kit and its timely implementation of extensive contact tracing to detect and suppress the spread of the virus have so far significantly contributed to mitigating human, economic, and social cost of the pandemic (Dighe, Cattarino, and Cuomo-Dannenburg. et al., 2020; Kang, Jang, and Kim. et al., 2020; Oh, Lee, and Schwarz. et al., 2020; You, 2020, and Fisher and Choe, 2020).

Nevertheless, the Korean public health authority's non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) and vaccination programs have faced several challenges that have undermined the broad-based public support for the government's mitigation strategies. Some of these challenges include 1) Christian fundamentalists' non-civic obstruction and often violent resistance waged against the proposed public health measures, 2) ultraconservative mass media's biased news reporting, and, more importantly, 3) its unmitigated propagation via various commercial news portals and social network service outlets.

This paper examines how the Korean government's COVID-19 mitigation efforts have faced various ultraconservative forces – both political and religious – throughout multiple phases of the COVID-19 epidemic and discusses how to address some of the problems from a legal and public policy point of view. For this purpose, the paper proceeds with identifying three distinct phases of the COVID-19 epidemic and examines how ultraconservative forces have undermined the credibility of the public health authority's mitigation efforts throughout the pandemic. The paper then briefly introduces some legal reform proposals that may help enhance transparency and accountability in the mass media market.

The analysis in this paper reveals that ultraconservative Christian fundamentalism and biased mass media have posed significant challenges to the public health authority's overall

pandemic mitigation strategies by propagating various ‘fake news’ including Sinophobia conspiracy narratives and false rumors about the vaccine safety. The discussion in this paper sheds light on some political economy aspects of the contemporary Korean society, which offers a useful comparative perspective of the relationship between the government (state) and civil society in the pandemic conjuncture.

## **2. Material and methods of analysis**

This paper begins with basic information about how the COVID-19 epidemic has played out in Korea, and, for this purpose, the paper presents selected epidemic data for Korea. There are multiple sources of the COVID-19 epidemic data that are publicly available for researchers. The main source of data used in this paper is compiled from the official website of Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) (KDCA 2020). The KDCA has released various epidemic data related to the novel coronavirus since the first imported infection case is confirmed. Individual researchers can view the daily press release and manually compile the data for the confirmed cases, recovered cases, deceased cases, all classified by sex, selected age group, and detailed geographical location of infection. This KDCA data series form the basis for the internationally comparable dataset compiled by the Center for System Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University, which only take the confirmed cases, recovered cases, deceased cases (ignoring all other demographic and detailed geographic information) for the international comparability. Since KDCA’s press releases contain more detailed information about the COVID-19 epidemic, the paper uses the manually compiled KDCA dataset for this analysis.

One of the significant challenges that the Korean public health authority has faced is non-civic and often violent resistance waged by various factions of Christian fundamentalists against the proposed mitigation measures. Armed with Sinophobia conspiracies, Christian fundamentalists’ agitations and non-civic resistance often instigate a powerful anti-government and anti-science force that undermines the public health authority’s pandemic mitigation efforts. As a way to illustrate how this politically motivated anti-government religious force negatively affects the effectiveness of the pandemic mitigation strategies, the paper conducts a text analysis of their logic and slogans that leading factions of Christian fundamentalism frequently use to mobilize their religious-cum-political forces. The raw material for this text analysis comes from a series of

selected newspaper articles and internal chats circulated among the members that are compiled and revealed by some reformist Christian civil society organizations.

Another significant factor that has undermined the efficacy of the public health authority's mitigation strategies comes from ultraconservative media organizations and their various media outlets. For the analysis of media framing and the ways in which these ultraconservative newspaper organizations and their commercial cable TV network have portrayed the government's mitigation efforts, the paper relies on various secondary sources that reveal their partial and biased reporting on the performance of the public health authority's non-pharmaceutical interventions and vaccination programs. This secondary source is primarily compiled by civil society media watchdogs and a few but important investigative journalist organizations.

### **3. The COVID-19 epidemic and non-pharmaceutical interventions in Korea**

Let us begin with a brief overview of the COVID-19 epidemic and the performance of the Korean public health authority's non-pharmaceutical interventions. As of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has exhibited three distinctive stages in Korea. After the first imported infection case was detected in late January of 2020, the first full-blown spread of the novel coronavirus began in mid-to-late February. According to KCDC, the immediate cause of this first wave was a massive religious assembly of a particular Christian cult, known as Shinchonji Church of Jesus. The coronavirus quickly spread among those who attended this religious gathering, which was held in a tightly packed mega church and other religious buildings. The spike in the number of confirmed cases lasted until early-May (May 10), when the new daily confirmed case fell below the weekly average of 50.

The second wave of the COVID-19 epidemic began in early August, as the number of confirmed cases rose sharply from weekly average of less than 50 to a peak of 441 on August 28, 2020. The immediate trigger of this second spike was also directly related with another super spreader event that was more political in nature: A conservative opposition party allied with some Christian fundamentalist factions held a massive political demonstration at the center of the capital city, Seoul, calling for the immediate resignation of incumbent President Moon Jae-In. They claimed that President was directly responsible for what they called 'a catastrophic failure' in stopping the spread of the 'Wuhan virus.' Unlike the first wave of the COVID-19

epidemic, however, the public health authority was unable to implement proper public healthcare measures such as enlisting and conducting preemptive diagnostic testing for suspected-patients who participated in the political rally. Leading figures of Christian fundamentalist movements not only fiercely opposed the health authority's healthcare measures but also instructed their members not to cooperate with health-care providers. Consequently, it took much longer time for the Korean health authority to manage to bring down the number of infected patients below 100 (only by September 20, 2020), and it is not even clear whether the second wave was suppressed at all.

The third and concurrent wave of the COVID-19 epidemic began around mid-October with daily confirmed cases rising from the low 60s to the peak of 1241 on December 25, 2020, which is the single highest number of daily confirmed cases in the entire period of the COVID-19 epidemic. Compared to the previous two waves, the latest phase of the infection dynamics is not associated with any single super spreader event. Instead, it stems from persistent infection cases found in small scale, multi-sited facilities throughout the country such as in facilities providing childcare, elderly care, private education, and entertainments as well as churches and other religious venues. The median age of newly confirmed cases is also lower than the second stage, as increasing numbers of younger and asymptomatic patients are suspected to spread virus variants that are likely to be more infectious and deadlier to some demographic groups.

During the whole period of this epidemic, the Korean public health authority led by the Central Disease Control and Management Headquarter has maintained and implemented consistent public health-care measures. The health authority has adopted policies of (1) conducting preemptive and targeted diagnostic testing on a massive scale, (2) tracing epidemiological links of the confirmed patients, fully utilizing the information-communication technology-based infrastructure in the country, and (3) expanding public and private medical facilities and equipment to accommodate the need of quarantining and treating different groups of patients in accordance with the severity of clinical symptoms. Taken together, these 'emergency disaster management programs' proved to be highly effective in lowering the number of infected patients and overall fatality rates (Government of the Republic of Korea, 2020; KCDC, 2020).

The following graphs show these three phases of the COVID-19 epidemic in Korea from January 20, 2020 to February 20, 2021.[1] Specifically, Figure 1 shows the trajectory of infection and recovery, while Figure 2 shows the total number of cumulative deaths associated with the virus infection by selected sex and age groups:

Figure 1 The number of confirmed cases (daily and cumulative) in Korea, Jan. 20, 2020 -- Feb. 20, 2021

Figure 2 The cumulative number of deaths by selected sex and age group, as of Feb. 20, 2021

#### **4. Challenges and debates surrounding the government's public health-care measures in Korea**

The Korean public health authority's relatively successful pandemic mitigation efforts, however, have not come without some significant challenges. These challenges include, among others, (1) politically motivated non-civic and non-cooperative behaviors waged by right-wing Christian fundamentalists, (2) distorted information about the novel coronavirus and vaccine safety propagated and reinforced by extremely biased ultraconservative mass media organizations, and (3) unmitigated propagation of these 'fake news' through various social network outlets and news portals.[2] This section discusses these issues in more detail and introduces some proposed legal reforms that may help address some of these problems.

##### ***1) Christian fundamentalists' Sinophobia conspiracies and their non-civic obstruction***

One of the biggest challenges to the government's public health measures emerged early in the pandemic comes from Christian fundamentalists' obstruction of non-pharmaceutical interventions. Armed with various Sinophobia conspiracy narratives and their own right-wing political agenda, Christian fundamentalists fiercely resisted the public health authority's various pandemic mitigation efforts and defended their non-civic and often violent obstructive behaviors in the name of 'religious freedom.'

Early in the pandemic, some faction of Christian fundamentalists created a variety of conspiracy theories about the 'true' origin of the 'Wuhan virus.' According to some of their narratives, 'the Communist Party in China artificially created the virus as part of its world domination tactic'. The party 'used the virus in Wuhan for their experiment,' and then 'intentionally spread it worldwide by sending infected Chinese tourists to Europe and exporting goods tainted with the virus to the US.' Another conspiracy theory stated that the outbreak of

the ‘Wuhan virus was God’s punishment for the communist suppression of their ‘Christian brothers and sisters’ residing in Wuhan area (Shin, 2021: 6, Kwon, 2020).

Based upon these stories, Christian fundamentalists quickly shifted their blame onto the incumbent Moon Jae-In government. They attacked the Moon administration’s ‘subservient’ foreign policy stance toward China and blamed the government for failing to adopt an immediate ban on Chinese tourists and suspension of all forms of international trade with Communist China. By allowing international flows of goods and people from China, goes the story, the Moon administration was actively collaborating with Communist China.

Christian fundamentalists’ Sinophobia-based conspiracy theories seemed to gain traction when ultraconservative factions of a powerful opposition party in the National Assembly joined forces and organized a violent demonstration at the center of Seoul on August 15, 2020. This super spreader event triggered the second wave of the COVID-19 that complicated the public health authority’s mitigation efforts. Unlike the first wave, the public health authority was unable to implement its preemptive health-care measures such as the contact tracing and quarantine of suspected patients. This was because highly politicized Christian fundamentalists-cum-suspected patients fiercely opposed and even violently resisted any form of public health-care measures. Not only did they resist to provide a full list of rally organizers and participants, but they also specifically instructed their loyal members to not cooperate with health-care officials. Because of these non-civic and often violent resistance, various public health care measures were substantially delayed. The original plan for opening schools and campuses for the fall semester was indefinitely postponed, and the government’s plan to resume the operation of museums, libraries, and other public facilities was also delayed consequently.

Many influential leaders from other Christian factions and different religions criticized this group of Christian fundamentalists. Public opinion became also highly critical of their hypocritical abuse of religious freedom (Danbinews, 2020). Some netizens even invented a new derogatory word ‘Gae-Dokgyo’ (개독교 in Korean), a combination of ‘Gae’ = (shitty) dog and ‘Kie-Dokgyo’ = Christianity), meaning ‘(shitty) dog-like, damning Christians.’ Moreover, one investigative reporter of this highly politicized Christian movement alleged that the primary motive underlying their anti-government rally was to defeat and reverse the Moon administration’s legal reforms governing churches and religious practice. One of these reform agenda was to introduce and impose a payroll tax and reasonable income tax rate on revenues millionaire pastors and mega

churches earn (MBC, 2020a). If this allegation is true, what lies behind all conspiracy narratives and their non-civic obstruction often defended in the name of religious freedom is nothing more than a militant pursuit of pure material interest at the expense of public health and safety.

The public's anger and increasingly negative perceptions about the anti-science and anti-government agitation notwithstanding, a few leading conservative churches and religious communities under their influence have never stopped spreading false rumors and their conspiracy narratives. They have continued to blame proposed public health measures (i.e., social distancing rule) for seriously infringing their Christian religious freedom and practice: 'A genuine and sincere Christian should attend the church ceremony (physically to pay a tithe),' Or 'online ceremony is no substitute for physical attendance at the house of God (meaning their mega church buildings to pay weekly and seasonal offering),' they say. 'Jesus is my vaccine and my only cure,' 'COVID-19 vaccines will manipulate your DNA and enslave all Christians,' they contend. Their conspiracy narratives never end without blaming what they claim the 'leftist government' – the Moon Jae-In administration for everything. The Moon government is 'stifling Christian conscience and religious freedom,' as a puppet of the Communist Party in China (and North Korea) (Shin, 2021: 20-21; 23-24, Kang, 2021: 7-9).

## ***2) Biased mass-media coverage and distorted information about the government's mitigation efforts***

Public opinion about the performance and effectiveness of the government's public health-care measures is also affected by how the mainstream media portray the governmental efforts and how their reporting is disseminated through various media outlets. In this respect, the Korean experience also demonstrates how difficult it is to preserve and protect freedom of press, while holding biased conservative mass media accountable.

Historically, the Korean mass media market has been dominated by a few ultraconservative newspaper organizations. Some of these newspaper companies grew and expanded their market share during the long-lasting military dictatorship presiding over the entire Korean society from 1960s to 1980s. Even as Korean society worked to purge its residual authoritarian legacy in the late 1980s in many social spheres through sustained grass-root democratic movements, the authoritarian power of ultraconservative news outlets to influence public opinion remains untouched (Han, 2020).



More recently, under the ultraconservative administrations of Lee Myung-Bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-Hye (2013-2017), right-wing newspaper organizations headed by *Chosun Ilbo* and *DongA Ilbo* acquired illicit licenses to establish their own commercial cable TV broadcasting channels, *TV Chosun* and *Channel A*, respectively (Choi and Jung 2012). Many media specialists and progressive media watchdogs in civil society have long highlighted the Lee Myung-Bak government's preferential treatment of these two TV cable channels and have thus advocated for strict regulation of their operations that have propagated extremely biased and distorted news and commercial contents (Cf. CCDM, 2017b; 2017c).

The public pressure for revoking the cable TV broadcasting license was intensified when the former President Park Geun-Hye was finally impeached and removed by the Korean Constitutional Court after more than half-year long candlelight vigils and peaceful but powerful protest over her corruption scandal and gross negligence (CCDM, 2017a). A former human right lawyer Moon Jae-In was elected in the emergent presidential election that immediately followed this impeachment event. Even though the Moon administration and his reformist governing party, Democratic Party of Korea, put forth a series of media reform agenda, the right-wing media moguls used their oversized market power and political connections with ultraconservative opposition parties to thwart the Democratic Party's legislative effort. Taking advantage of their dominance in the mass media market to influence public opinion and thereby, to influence congressional legislation, they have systematically undermined the credibility and legitimacy of the Moon administration's various reformist policy agenda.

The right-wing media assault on the Moon administration intensified with the advent of the COVID-19 epidemic. Both *Chosun Ilbo* and *DongA Ilbo* and their commercial cable TV outlets amplified the conspiracy narratives of the 'Wuhan virus' and false claims about the government's foreign-policy subservience to China. They also called for an immediate ban on the entry of all Chinese nationals, echoing the Sinophobia and racist mantra of the former U.S. President Donald Trump who shifted total blame to the Chinese for the global spread of the virus.

It is uncertain to what extent this conservative media framing and misinformation has negatively affected the public's perception about the government's mitigation efforts and risk associated with the novel coronavirus. According to one early study conducted based upon an online survey indicates that a certain media framing and misinformation can increase fear of

infection, anxiety, and prejudice against infected people, which is detrimental to the public health authority's various mitigation efforts (Lee, Lee, and Park et al., 2020).

The public health authority's 3T (testing, tracing, and treatment) strategies achieved a remarkable performance in suppressing and mitigating the COVID-19 epidemic during the first wave. Compared to many other countries, both the number of infected patients and those who died of the infectious disease were pushed down to a manageable level. Consequently, the approval rating for the governing party and public support for the health authority's mitigation efforts soared, which ultimately gave a landslide victory for the governing Democratic Party in the legislative election (held on April 15, 2020) (Jo and Chang, 2020). The government's effective mitigation strategies also gained wide range of international attentions and recognitions (Dighe, Cattarino, and Cuomo-Dannenburg. et al., 2020; Fisher and Choe, 2020)

However, the misinformation in the conservative news outlets continued unabated. In their telling, the success in taming the spread of the virus was due, in part, to 'a little bit of luck' and to the remarkable efforts spearheaded by the KCDC leadership. What was conveniently ignored in this story is that the KCDC is a government agency under the Ministry of Health and Welfare whose annual and supplemental budget was fully restored from the level that the previous conservative administrations maintained and successively increased under the Moon administration. More importantly, the KCDC was upgraded to a new independent disease control and prevention agency – the KDCA (Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency) – commanding more budgetary support and policy autonomy under this administration.

For decades, ultraconservative news organizations have been propagating maliciously distorted and selective information as if they constitute legitimate 'news.' Fierce right-wing propaganda, often justified and accolated in the name of 'diversity of world views', has been systematically infiltrated through various mass-media platforms and have seriously challenged every meaningful social policy reform. Deriding and ridiculing these conservative journalists' biased reporting practice, many young Korean netizens have coined the word 'Gie-Raegie' (기레기 in Korean). The word comes from a combination of Gie-Ja (journalists) and Sseu-raegie ('trash or garbage'), meaning 'trash journalists' or 'garbage-like journalism.' Despite the public's increasingly skeptical view about the quality of news and media contents, there is no shortage of Gie-Raegies inventing and propagating various fake news, poisoning the national conversation with hyperbolic misinformation and dangerous disinformation.

Occasionally, these trash journalists encounter serious criticisms and public pressures. Whenever these happen, Gie-Raegies always defend their practice in the name of freedom of press and expressions. Just as politically motivated Gae-Dokgyo disciples have attempted to justify their anti-science and racist Sinophobia in the name of God and religious freedom, Gie-Raegies have defended their dangerous disinformation campaigns with the constitutional freedom of press. Both freedom of religion and freedom of press, two important constitutional values are frequently abused in this way.

### **3) *The propagation of 'fake news' through news portals and various social network services***

Another important channel through which some of these 'garbage-like' news media contents are disseminated is a search engine-based news portal provided by two major private web search engine service companies, *Naver.com* and *Daum.net* operating in Korea. Unlike *Google.com* or *Yahoo.com*, Korean web search engine service providers have exercised their exclusive power to maintain their online news stand through algorithms, in which all sources of newspaper articles and TV channel's media contents are collected, screened, and disseminated to the public. Many smartphone users in Korea are accustomed to frequently access to various news and media contents via these online news portals.

The problem is that commercial and ideological bias of these online portals determine what passes for 'national news.' The national news screened in this way, of course, are tainted by political and commercial interests of the two major news portal service providers. Quite recently, investigative journalists have found that the algorithms designed and used by *Naver* and *Daum* are not objective as they claimed, but instead exhibit an extreme bias in favor of ultraconservative media contents. Smartphone users are increasingly exposed to these conservative, biased, and even baseless critiques of the government's mitigation efforts stemming from ultraconservative news organizations longer and more frequently through these outlets. Even if one picky smartphone user intentionally chooses a selective progressive news article, somehow their algorithms 'objectively' provide a series of news reporting full of ultraconservative contents that often denounce the government's performance in virus mitigation efforts and frequently exaggerate administrative mistakes committed by the government (MBC, 2020b, 2021a).

Ultraconservative ideologues also amplify their message through a variety of social network services (SNS) that they operate such as in personal *YouTube* channels and the group chatting

services provided by *KakaoTalk*. These SNS channels were central to the political mobilization initiated by Christian fundamentalists during and after the second wave and to the radicalization of their supporters through the amplification of conspiracy theories and misinformation about government policies. It seems that some subscribers to these SNS channels have reinforced their biased worldview and ultraconservative conspiracies to the extreme, so that they often committed an extremely anti-social and violent behavior in the face of COVID-19 mitigation measures (Cf. CCDM, 2020).

Perhaps it is under these hostile and debasing media environments that the credibility of the public health authority's various mitigation efforts and administrative plans for the COVID-19 vaccinations has been seriously undermined. The Korean government began to formulate and prepare for the nationwide COVID-19 vaccination program in late 2020 and began administering its phased vaccinations in the late February of 2021. The government did not feel an urgent need of buying up scarce and expensive COVID-19 vaccines, partly because of its early success in suppressing the virus spread through its effective non-pharmaceutical interventions. The public health officials also maintained a cautious attitude toward the vaccination drive because they wanted to carefully watch and monitor the situation in other countries that were in full vaccination drive (notably the case in the US and UK) to minimize possible negative health effects associated with 'emergency uses' of various vaccine candidates. This cautious policy stance toward obtaining vaccines and lengthy negotiations with major global COVID-19 vaccine developers were justified given the government's remarkable success in prior non-pharmaceutical interventions. [3]

Not unexpectedly, this minor delay in the implementation of the vaccination program was met with hyperbolic attacks by ultraconservative mass media apparatuses. Using their outsized online voice, they took the opportunity to condemn and demonize the Moon administration's 'irresponsible', 'haphazard' policy stance in the global vaccine competition. At these online sites, the government's careful and deliberate actions were portrayed as total administrative failures. 'Korea,' it was argued, 'lost again in the global vaccine war' because of 'the incompetence of the Moon administration,' which completely failed to cope with the 'Wuhan virus' in the first place and 'indulged in international praises of so-called K-quarantine', all the while wasting precious time to secure vaccines. [4]

Even after the government's repeated assurances that it had successfully secured enough quantity of vaccines for herd immunity and it had a sufficient administrative capacity for initiating its vaccination program guided by a clear set of priorities, the hostile media attack did not subside. Now the same news media organizations began to exaggerate side effects associated with a particular vaccine. 'The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine that the administration obtained is laden with so many unknown side effects,' 'The administration has hurriedly signed a deal to buy the cheapest vaccine without paying due attention to the potential side effects,' they say. When a few incidents of side effects were reported in early March, they were portrayed as if lethal and unmanageable by conservative media outlets (Kim Go-Eun, 2021; CCDM, 2021; MBC, 2021b).

The extent to which public perception about vaccine safety has been influenced by these systematic and malicious attacks is uncertain. However, one survey conducted by a private opinion poll company, Korea Research, finds that the willingness to get a COVID-19 vaccine shot has steadily declined over a year. The first survey conducted in late July of 2020 indicated that about 87% of participants were willing to get any COVID-19 vaccine as prescribed and administered by the public health authority. But this number fell to mere 67% during the first week of January 2021 when malicious attacks and a systematically organized misinformation campaign ramped up against the government. To counter the 'fake news' and explain the government's assurance policy for vaccine safety, the public health authority was forced to divert its scarce resources (their time and energy) away from the actual COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Perhaps due to this concerted effort and information campaigns, the percentage of those who indicated willing to get the vaccine rose to 74% as of early March of 2021. However, the same percentage has never reached back to its previous peak of 87% so far (Korea Research, 2021: 4).

As this example illustrates, the power of ultraconservative news organizations to shape public opinion is not insignificant. By controlling the national conversation through their dominance over various mass-media platforms, ultraconservative news organizations have demonstrated their power to undermine and seriously challenge the Korean government's year-long COVID-19 mitigation efforts and vaccination programs.

#### ***4) Debates over proper legal reforms for enhancing media accountability***

During the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic, one keen observer of Korean politics argued that both conservative politicians and Christian fundamentalists were the biggest threats to the

government's efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 (Park, 2020). Probably the author did not have enough space to add that ultraconservative news organizations and their whole media apparatuses also played a crucial role in fueling the anti-science and anti-government sentiment.

Many progressive lawmakers and civil society organizations have long called for introducing comprehensive legal reforms to level the tilted media market and to enhance the accountability of conservative mass media outlets. This reform proposal includes: (1) Strengthening the existing Korea Communications Commission (KCC)'s oversights over the contents of public broadcast and cable TV channels, including the investigation and imposition of sanctions against violations committed by broadcasting or communications business operators and preventing the circulation of illegal or harmful information; (2) Empowering the existing Press Arbitration Commission (PAC) to reinforce its mediation and arbitration authority, including punitive damages for Gie-Raegies' production and dissemination of fake news; (3) Introducing punitive damages system in the media market to prevent and sanction dissemination of fake news, including ones circulating in *YouTube* channels and other SNS platforms; (4) Enhancing transparency and democratic governance in major arbitration and deliberation process by allowing wide range of civil participations and observations, including the mandatory regular publication of white papers on the matter and easy public access to documented results.

Most of these reform agenda have been proposed by many civil society media watchdogs for a long time (See, for example, CCDM, 2017b, PCMR, 2017), and there is nothing radical in this modest reform proposal from their point of view. Nonetheless, some conservative critics say that the proposed media reform bills will severely undermine freedom of press and, in the worst case, can be used to seize and control mass media by the 'leftist government.' Many progressives, on the other hand, the proposed bills have so many loopholes that the already established mega media corporations can easily exploit. They also argue that the cap placed upon the maximum amount of monetary compensation associated with the punitive damage clause is not enough to sanction and prevent damaging media contents emanating from ultraconservative newspapers and their cable TV outlets (Jung Chul-Eun, 2021; Kim Young-Hwa, 2021). Whether this modest legal reform and related efforts to bring a balance in mass media environment in Korea would achieve any meaningful progress remain to be seen. Until then, however, the systematic manipulation of public opinion waged by a whole array of

ultraconservative media outlets will continue to be operating as a dominant force in Korean politics and society alike.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper seeks to analyze some of the significant challenges facing the Korean government's efforts to suppress and mitigate the COVID-19 epidemic and discusses how to address these problems from a legal and public policy point of view. Even though the public health authority's non-pharmaceutical interventions have achieved a remarkable outcome in dealing with the epidemic in Korea, many conservative forces – both political and religious – have negatively affected the public perception about the government's mitigation efforts, and, more importantly, ultraconservative media's biased campaigns against the government's health-care measures have engendered a serious difficulty in maintaining the broad-based public support. Whether the Korean society will be able to address these chronic social problems, while successfully overcoming the immediate health emergency remains to be seen.

Every society has its own unique problems. But some problems and various forces at work underlying these social problems are quite similar. American experience under the Trump administration – its initial denial and gross negligence of the danger of the COVID-19, its repeated failures in formulating and implementing consistent COVID-19 epidemic mitigation strategies, its partial political mobilization of ultraconservative forces (White supremacists and Christian fundamentalists) to win the election, and its unabated stronghold in many states and regions in the U.S. even after the presidential election) may exemplify how difficult it is to address and engage with anti-science sentiment and forces. Even though the severity is not the same, the Korean experience has also shown that ultraconservative forces that produce and propagate unlimited fake news and anti-science and anti-government sentiment can be one of the greatest threats to its pandemic mitigation efforts.

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The author reports that the paper does not have any conflicting interests.

## Notes

[1] Starting from February 26, 2021, the Korean public health authority began administering the first dose of COVID-19 vaccines, putting the COVID-19 infection and recovery dynamics on a different trajectory. Therefore, this paper presents the related epidemic data only for this period from January 20, 2020 to February 20, 2021.

[2] One may want to add some other factors such as the concern for privacy and surveillance issue associated with the government's ICT-based contact tracing for COVID-19 patients to the list of these problems. For example, one superficial observer of Korean society blame the government's contact tracing as 'authoritarian' and total 'disregard' of individual freedom and liberty (Aiyng and Lee, 2020). Other saw 'the state's class domination' and power grab in the same pandemic mitigation effort (Baca, 2020). Opposition and blame shifting waged by conservative political force is another strong candidate for explaining the difficulty in implementing the public health measure more effectively. Early in pandemic, one keen observer of Korean politics, for example, highlighted conservative opposition politics as one of the biggest threats to the stability of the government's COVID-19 mitigation efforts (Park, 2020). This paper, however, is primarily focused on ultraconservative Christian fundamentalism and biased mass media and their negative effects on the government's pandemic mitigation efforts played out throughout the epidemic. The rationale for this identification is provided below.

[3] The Korean public health authority began its COVID-19 vaccination on February 26, 2021 with a set of priorities. The first dose of vaccine was administered to all health care service workers and patients in convalescent hospitals, mental health care facilities and rehab centers (doctors, nurses, social service workers, and long-term patients) and frontline medical workers (those who are working at COVID-19 testing sites and evaluation labs) on the first day, and the vaccination eligibility has been gradually expanded according to ages (those who are 75 years old and older



followed by the age group for 60-74), existing health conditions, and social importance of occupations (educators and service workers at childcare facilities, teachers and educators in schools, police, firefighters, military personnel, airline workers, etc.). There has been no serious case of ‘vaccine inequity problem’ or discrimination in vaccination based upon the residency (regional disparity), gender and income level in Korea (Jung, Jaehun, 2021). This is a stark contrast to a wide range of income-related, gender-related, race and ethnicity-based, and region-based discrimination and disparities in vaccinations observed in the U.S.

[4] One can easily detect what is missing in this media framing and blame shifting: The scarcity of vaccines and global disparity in vaccination that has severely constrained the government’s ability to obtain and administer vaccination. As of writing, global disparity in COVID-19 vaccine access is not fully addressed (WHO, 2021). The highest share of the total population that received at least one vaccine dose is largely concentrated in North America and Europe with the biggest beneficiaries being the UK, US, Canada, Germany, France (Our World in Data, 2021). This geographic concentration and inequity of COVID-19 vaccination is largely determined by the intellectual property restrictions imposed by transnational mega pharmaceutical companies, rich countries’ ‘vaccine nationalism,’ and the individual government’s financial ability and bargaining power to obtain vaccines. Even though the Biden administration has proposed to ease the vaccine-related intellectual property restrictions, it does not lift a ban on COVID-19 vaccine export. This geopolitical restriction and global political economy aspect of the vaccine access is a crucial issue that needs to be addressed whenever one attempts to evaluate the performance of an individual government’s vaccination efforts. However, nowhere in ultraconservative Korean mass media can we find relevant information about this global vaccine inequity issue and how to address this problem.

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## Figures

Figure 1 The number of confirmed cases (daily and cumulative) in Korea, January 20, 2020 -- February 20, 2021

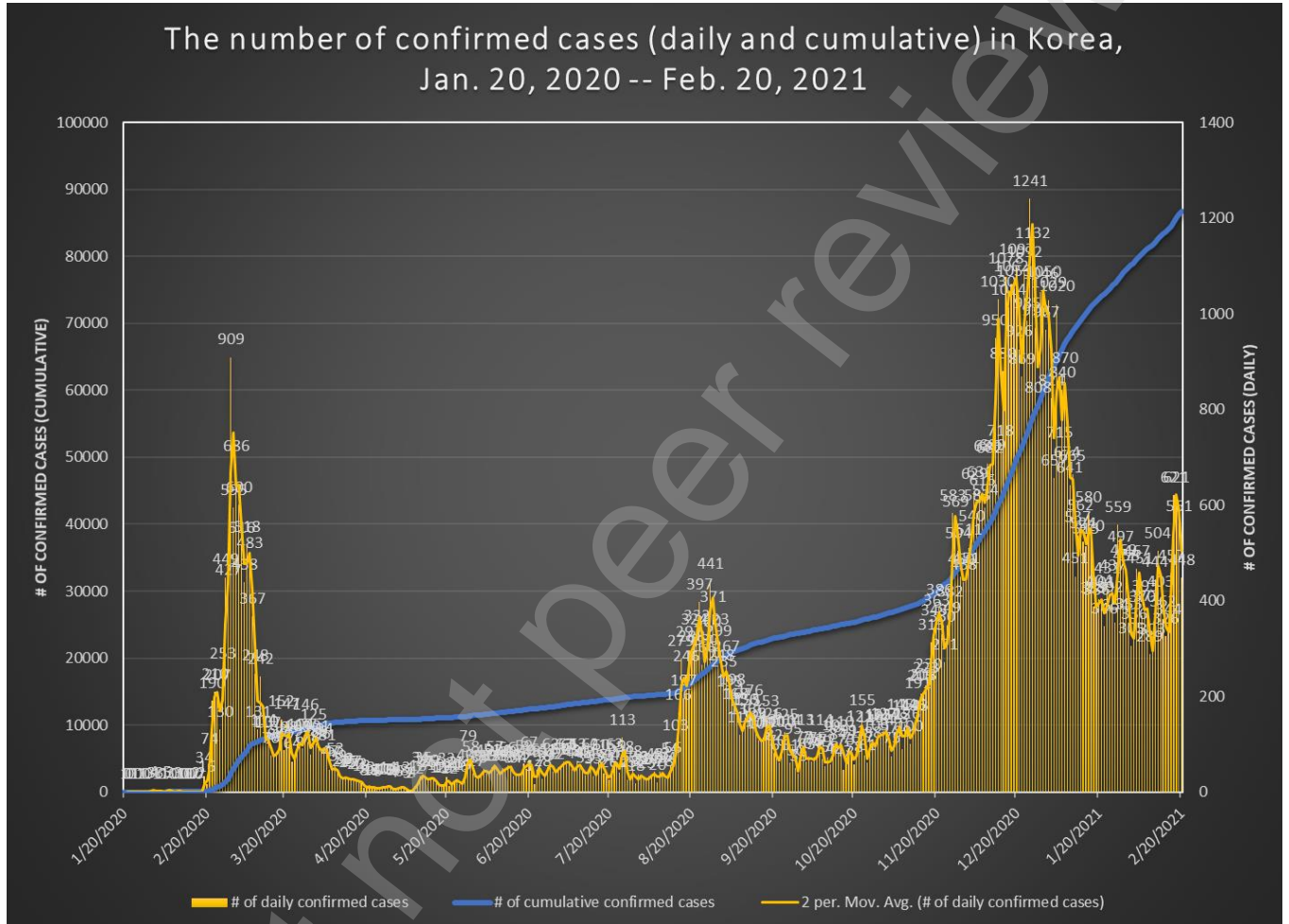


Figure 2 The cumulative number of deaths by selected sex and age groups, as of February 20, 2021

