

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief. The 2014 Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the DPRK, however, concluded there was an almost complete denial by the government of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and in many instances, violations of human rights committed by the government constituted crimes against humanity. In October the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK reported to the UN General Assembly the country's use of arbitrary executions, political prison camps, and torture amounting to crimes against humanity remained unchanged despite a series of diplomatic engagements between the country and other nations. In December the UN General Assembly passed a resolution that condemned "the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights in and by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." The assembly specifically expressed its very serious concern at "the imposition of the death penalty for political and religious reasons," and "all-pervasive and severe restrictions, both online and offline, on the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion or belief, opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association." In May, after diplomatic discussions involving the U.S. Secretary of State, the government released a U.S. citizen pastor who had been arrested in 2017. A South Korean nongovernmental organization (NGO) said defectors who arrived in South Korea from 2007 until March 2018 and other sources reported 1,341 cases of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief by DPRK authorities, including 120 killings and 90 disappearances. The government deported, detained, and sometimes released foreigners who allegedly engaged in religious activity within its borders. According to NGOs and academics, the government's policy toward religion was intended to maintain an appearance of tolerance for international audiences while suppressing internally all religious activities not sanctioned by the state. The country's inaccessibility and lack of timely information continued to make arrests and punishments difficult to verify.

Defector accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to fear their activities would be reported to the authorities. There were conflicting estimates of the number of religious groups in the country and their membership.

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the country. In July the Secretary of State hosted the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, at which the Vice President said, "...North Korea's persecution of Christians has no rival on the Earth. It is unforgiving, systematic, unyielding, and often fatal." The United States cosponsored a resolution at the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council condemning the government's systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations. In December the Department of State submitted the Report on Human Rights Abuses and Censorship in North Korea to Congress, identifying three entities and three North Korean officials responsible for or associated with serious human rights abuses or censorship. Since 2001, the country has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, 2018, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions to which North Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 25.4 million (July 2018 estimate). In a 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Roman Catholics. The report noted Chondoism, a modern religious movement based on a 19th century Korean neo-Confucian movement, had approximately 15,000 practitioners. Consulting shamans and engaging in shamanistic rituals is reportedly widespread but difficult to quantify. The South Korea-based Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) reported that five priests from the Russian Orthodox Church are in Pyongyang. South Korean and other foreign religious groups estimate the number of religious practitioners in the country is considerably higher than reported by the authorities. UN estimates place the Christian population at between 200,000 and 400,000. The COI report stated, based on the government's own figures, the proportion of religious adherents among the population dropped from close to 24 percent in 1950 to 0.016 percent in 2002.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides that “Citizens shall have the right of faith. This right guarantees them chances to build religious facilities or perform religious rituals.” It further provides, however, “Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the state and social order.”

According to a 2014 official government document, “Freedom of religion is allowed and provided by the State law within the limit necessary for securing social order, health, social security, morality and other human rights.”

The country’s criminal code punishes a “person who, without authorization, imports, makes, distributes or illegally keeps drawings, photos, books, video recordings, or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal, or foul contents.” The criminal code also bans engagement in “superstitious activities in exchange for money or goods.” The NGO Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) reported that under these two provisions, ownership of religious materials brought in from abroad is illegal and punishable by imprisonment and other forms of severe punishment, including execution. Also according to the HRNK, the law banning “superstitious activities” is specifically intended to prohibit fortune telling and enable the imprisonment of fortunetellers.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government continued to deal harshly with those who engaged in almost any religious practices through executions, torture, beatings, and arrests. An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 political prisoners, some imprisoned for religious reasons, were believed to be held in the political prison camp system in remote areas under horrific conditions. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said a policy of guilt by association was often applied in cases of detentions of Christians, meaning that the relatives of Christians were also detained regardless of their beliefs.

In February CSW released a survey of 100 sources, including refugees that asked how respondents thought the situation for religious believers had changed since 2007. Twenty-four percent said there was less freedom, 13 percent said about the same, 6 percent said more freedom, and 57 percent said they did not know. One refugee said there was no religious freedom in the country, and another said that if someone were found to be a Christian, he or she would immediately be shot.

Religious and human rights groups outside the country continued to provide numerous reports that members of underground churches were arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed because of their religious beliefs. According to the NKDB, there was a report in 2016 of disappearances of persons who were found to be practicing religion within detention facilities. International NGOs and North Korean defectors reported any religious activities conducted outside of those that were state-sanctioned, including praying, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, could lead to severe punishment, including imprisonment in political prison camps. According to the South Korean government-affiliated Korea Institute for National Unification's (KINU) 2018 report, authorities punished both superstitious activities and religious activities, but the latter more severely. In general, punishment was very strict when citizens or defectors were involved with the Bible or Christian missionaries; authorities frequently punished those involved in superstitions with forced labor, which reportedly could be avoided by bribery.

The government deported, detained, and sometimes released foreigners who allegedly engaged in religious activity within its borders.

In May, after diplomatic discussions involving the U.S. Secretary of State, the government released from prison a U.S. pastor arrested in 2017 for "hostile acts" toward the state. In June Religion News Service reported the pastor said that when he asked his captors what hostile acts he had committed, they told him his crime was prayer. *Time* reported the pastor had worked for several weeks at the privately funded Pyongyang University for Science and Technology, which was supported in part by evangelical Christians outside the country.

The Korea Times reported in December that at least three Republic of Korea (ROK) citizen missionaries remained detained in the DPRK despite the ROK government's efforts to negotiate their release. One had been held since 2013, and two others since 2014.

The NKDB aggregated 1,341 cases of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief by authorities within the country reported by defectors and other sources from 2007 to March 2018. Charges included propagation of religion, possession of religious materials, religious activity, and contact with religious practitioners. Of the 1,341 cases, DPRK authorities reportedly killed 120 individuals (8.9 percent), disappeared 90 (6.7 percent), physically injured 48 (3.6 percent), deported or forcibly moved 51 (3.8 percent), detained 794 (59.2 percent), and restricted movement of 133 (9.9 percent).

In October the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK reported to the UN General Assembly the country's use of arbitrary executions, political prison camps, and torture amounting to crimes against humanity remained unchanged despite a series of diplomatic engagements between the country and other nations. In December the UN General Assembly passed a resolution that condemned "the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights in and by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." The assembly specifically expressed its very serious concern at "the imposition of the death penalty for political and religious reasons," and "all-pervasive and severe restrictions, both online and offline, on the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion or belief, opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association." The assembly also strongly urged the government "to respect fully all human rights and fundamental freedoms." The annual resolution again welcomed the Security Council's continued consideration of the relevant conclusions and recommendations of the COI. The February 2014 COI final report concluded there was an almost complete denial by the government of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information, and association. It further concluded that, in many instances, the violations of human rights committed by the government constituted crimes against humanity, and it recommended that the United Nations ensure those most responsible for the crimes against humanity were held accountable.

The COI report found the government considered Christianity a serious threat, as it challenged the official cult of personality and provided a platform for social and political organization and interaction outside the government. The report concluded Christians faced persecution, violence, and heavy punishment if they practiced their religion outside the state-controlled churches. The report further recommended the country allow Christians and other religious believers to exercise their religions independently and publicly without fear of punishment, reprisal, or surveillance.

Defectors continued to report the government increased its investigation, repression, and persecution of unauthorized religious groups in recent years, but access to information on current conditions was limited.

According to KINU's 2018 report, "it is practically impossible for North Korean people to have a religion in their daily lives." According to the NKDB, the constitution represents only a nominal freedom granted to political supporters, and only when the regime deems it necessary to use it as a policy tool. A survey of 12,625 refugees between 2007 and March 2018 by the NKDB found 99.6 percent

said there was no religious freedom in the country. In its 2018 report the NKDB said only 4.1 percent of 12,885 defectors said they had seen a Bible when they lived there, although survey data reflected a slight increase in recent years.

Juche (“self-reliance”) and *Suryong* (“supreme leader”) remained important ideological underpinnings of the government and the cults of personality of previous leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and current leader Kim Jong Un. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority was regarded as opposition to the national interest and reportedly resulted in severe punishment.

Some scholars stated the *Juche* philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resembled a form of state-sponsored theology. Approximately 100,000 *Juche* research centers reportedly existed throughout the country.

The HRNK reported the government continued to promote a policy that all citizens, young and old, participate in local defense and be willing to mobilize for national defense purposes. There were no exceptions for these or any form of military service for conscientious objectors.

While shamanism has always been practiced to some degree in the country, NGOs noted an apparent continued increase in shamanistic practices, including in Pyongyang. These NGOs reported government that authorities continued to react by taking measures against the practice of shamanism. In October 2017 the HRNK reported at least one individual had recently been imprisoned for fortune telling and other “crimes.” Defector reports cited an increase in party members consulting fortunetellers in order to gauge the best time to defect.

According to the NKDB, the South Korean government estimated that as of 2016 there were 121 religious facilities in North Korea, including 60 Buddhist temples, 52 Chondoist temples, three state-controlled Protestant churches, and one Russian Orthodox church. A 2014 government report also cited the existence of 64 Buddhist temples but said the temples had lost religious significance in the country and remained only as cultural heritage sites or tourist destinations. The 2015 KINU white paper counted 60 Buddhist temples and noted most citizens did not realize Buddhist temples were religious facilities nor saw Buddhist monks as religious figures.

The five state-controlled Christian churches in Pyongyang included three Protestant churches (Bongsu, Chilgol, and Jeil Churches), a Catholic church

(Changchung Cathedral), and the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-Giving Trinity. The Chilgol Church was dedicated to the memory of former leader Kim Il Sung's mother, Kang Pan Sok, who was a Presbyterian deaconess. The number of congregants regularly worshiping at these five churches was unknown, and there was no information on whether scheduled services were available at these locations. Some defectors who previously lived in or near Pyongyang reported knowing about these churches. One defector said when he lived in Pyongyang, authorities arrested individuals whom they believed lingered too long outside these churches to listen to the music or consistently drove past them each week when services were being held on suspicion of being secret Christians. This defector also said authorities quickly realized one unintended consequence of allowing music at the services and allowing persons to attend church was that many of the attendees converted to Christianity, so authorities took steps to mitigate that outcome. Numerous other defectors from outside Pyongyang reported no knowledge of these churches, and according to the 2018 KINU white paper, no Protestant or Catholic churches existed in the country except in Pyongyang. In the paper, KINU also said foreign Christians who visited the country testified they witnessed the door of the church being closed on Easter Sunday when they visited without prior consultation, and many foreign visitors said church activities seemed to be staged.

Foreign legislators who attended services in Pyongyang in previous years reported congregations arrived and departed services as groups on tour buses, and some observed the worshippers did not include any children. Some foreigners noted they were not permitted to have contact with worshippers, and others stated they had limited interaction with them. Foreign observers had limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups but generally assumed the government monitored them closely.

KINU also reported in 2015 the existence of state-sanctioned religious organizations in the country such as the Korean Christian Federation (KCF), Korea Buddhist Federation, Korean Catholic Association (KCA), Korea Chondoist Central Guidance Committee, and Korean Council of Religionists. The NKDB white paper also noted the existence of the Korea Orthodox Committee, which it said is a Russian Orthodox Church organization. There was minimal information available on the activities of such organizations, except for some information on inter-Korean religious exchanges in 2015.

The government-established KCA provided basic services at the Changchung Roman Catholic Cathedral but had no ties to the Vatican. There also were no Vatican-recognized Catholic priests, monks, or nuns residing in the country.

According to foreign religious leaders who traveled to the country, there were Protestant pastors at Bongsu and Chilgol Churches, although it was not known if they were resident or visiting pastors.

Five Russian Orthodox priests served at the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-Giving Trinity, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country. Several of them reportedly studied at the Russian Orthodox seminary in Moscow.

According to a report in *Orthodox Christianity* on August 31, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow ordained two priests to serve in North Korea. The report said four students from North Korea had attended the Khabarovsk Theological Seminary in the past two years. The patriarch told Chairman of the Orthodox Committee of North Korea Vitaly Kim Chi So, "I believe that with the advent of the clergy in North Korea, the needs of Orthodox believers will be met," according to the report.

In its 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 "family worship centers." According to the 2018 KINU report, however, not one defector who had testified for the report was aware of the existence of such "family churches". According to a survey of 12,810 defectors cited in the 2018 NKDB report, none had ever seen any of these purported home churches, and only 1.3 percent of respondents believed they existed. Observers stated that "family worship centers" may be part of the state-controlled KCF.

The COI report concluded authorities systematically sought to hide from the international community the persecution of Christians who practiced their religion outside state-controlled churches by pointing to the small number of state-controlled churches as exemplifying religious freedom and pluralism.

According to KINU's 2018 report, the government continued to use authorized religious organizations for external propaganda and political purposes and reported citizens were strictly barred from entering places of worship. Ordinary citizens considered such places primarily as "sightseeing spots for foreigners." Foreigners who met with representatives of government-sponsored religious organizations stated they believed some members were genuinely religious, but they noted others appeared to know little about religious doctrine. KINU concluded the lack of

churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated ordinary citizens did not have religious freedom. In January the NGO Open Doors and Express.co.uk reported pictures showing religious congregations in churches in the country were staged.

In May a six-person international delegation from the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) including WCC General Secretary Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit and WCRC General Secretary Rev. Chris Ferguson visited Pyongyang at the invitation of the KCF. In August the KCF was permitted to officially accept an invitation from the United Methodist Church to deepen relationships.

In 2017, NK News, an independent news provider based outside the country, reported the government had attempted to appear less hostile to Christianity by sending local clergy to international Christian seminars and publishing its own official translation of the King James Bible. Also in 2017, NK News interviewed an official of the privately funded Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, who said he occasionally attended the local Protestant church in Pyongyang where the pastor's sermon was "normally good" but often focused on progovernment politics. The official added he and his colleagues confined their worship to 6 a.m. prayers in a small university office.

The NKDB stated officials conducted thorough searches of incoming packages and belongings at ports and airports to search for religious items as well as other items deemed objectionable by the government.

Little was known about the day-to-day life of individuals practicing a religion. There were no reports members of government-controlled religious groups suffered discrimination, but the government reportedly regarded members of underground churches or those connected to missionary activities as subversive elements. Scholars said authorities meted out strict punishment to forcibly returned defectors, including those who had contact with Christian missionaries or other foreigners while in China.

The government reportedly allowed certain forms of religious education, including programs at three-year colleges for training Protestant and Buddhist clergy, a religious studies program at Kim Il-sung University, a graduate institution that trained pastors, and other seminaries related to Christian or Buddhist groups.

Christians were restricted to the lowest class rungs of the *songbun* system, which classifies individuals on the basis of social class, family background, and presumed support of the regime based on political opinion and religious views. The *songbun* classification system results in discrimination in education, health care, employment opportunities, and residence. According to KINU the government continued to view Christianity in particular as a means of foreign, Western encroachment. KINU again reported citizens continued to receive education from authorities at least twice a year emphasizing ways to detect and identify individuals who engage in spreading Christianity.

According to an April Associated Press article, dozens of missionaries in China near the border, most of whom were South Koreans or ethnic Koreans, worked with North Koreans. According to the Rev. Kim Kyou Ho, head of the Seoul-based Chosen People Network, in recent years, 10 such front-line missionaries and pastors died mysteriously and the North Korean government was suspected of involvement in those deaths.

The government reportedly continued to be concerned that faith-based South Korean relief and refugee assistance efforts along the northeast border of China had both humanitarian and political goals, including the overthrow of the government, and alleged these groups were involved in intelligence gathering. The government reportedly continued tightening border controls in an effort to crack down on any such activities.

The government continued to allow some overseas faith-based aid organizations to operate inside the country to provide humanitarian assistance. Such organizations reported they were not allowed to proselytize; their contact with local citizens was limited and strictly monitored, and government escorts accompanied them at all times. Some workers of such organizations reported being permitted to take their personal Bibles into the country.

According to press reports, in October the South Korean President delivered to Pope Francis an invitation from Chairman Kim Jong Un to visit the country. According to a South Korean press secretary, Pope Francis said, "I will definitely answer if I get the invitation, and I can go." In December *Voice of America* reported a Vatican official said it was unlikely the pope would visit in 2019.

Media reported in August that, according to a Russian Orthodox Church official, a delegation was to visit Pyongyang in October to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Russia-DPRK ties. Patriarch Kirill reportedly said "in the northern part of Korea,

the DPRK, a society of Orthodox believers of North Korea has been created and is actively working.” In November a Russian delegation headed by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Volokolamsk – the most important cleric in the Russian Orthodox Church after Patriarch Kirill – visited Pyongyang and delivered a gift from Patriarch Kirill to Kim Jong Un. Media reported Metropolitan Hilarion celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity together with Father Feodor Kim, dean of the Church. During the celebration, they reportedly offered prayers in memory of Andrei Karlov, who served in the country from 2001 to 2006 and had made a special effort to build a Russian Orthodox church in Pyongyang.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Defector accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to the fear their activities would be reported to the authorities.

The COI report concluded government messaging regarding the purported evils of Christianity led to negative views of Christianity among ordinary citizens.

In 2017, KINU reported accounts of private Christian religious activity in the country, although the existence of underground churches and the scope of underground religious activity remained difficult to quantify. While some NGOs and academics estimated up to several hundred thousand Christians practiced their faith underground, others questioned the existence of a large-scale underground church or concluded it was impossible to estimate accurately the number of underground religious believers. Individual underground congregations were reportedly very small and typically confined to private homes. Some defector reports confirmed unapproved religious materials were available and secret religious meetings occurred, spurred by cross-border contact with individuals and groups in China. Some NGOs reported individual underground churches were connected to each other through well-established networks. The government did not allow outsiders access to confirm such claims.

According to KINU, defectors reported being unaware of any recognized religious organizations that maintained branches outside Pyongyang. Religious ceremonies such as for weddings and funerals were almost unknown.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK and has no official presence in the country. In June, however, the United States and the DPRK held their first ever head of state summit, in Singapore, and both leaders agreed to meet again in 2019.

The U.S. Secretary of State was involved in diplomatic discussions that resulted in the release of an American pastor in May, and accompanied him from the country to the United States.

In July at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, the Secretary of State hosted survivors of religious persecution including Ji Hyeon-a, a North Korean defector whom North Korean authorities tortured and imprisoned because she had a Bible. After a failed escape attempt, North Korean authorities forced her to have an abortion. She was later able to escape. In his remarks, the Vice President said, "...North Korea's persecution of Christians has no rival on the Earth. It is unforgiving, systematic, unyielding, and often fatal. The mere possession of a Christian Bible is a capital offense. And those identified by the regime as Christians are regularly executed or condemned with their families to North Korea's gulags."

The United States cosponsored the resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in December that condemned the country's "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations." The resolution further expressed grave concern over the country's denial of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as of the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, and association, and urged the government to take immediate steps to ensure these rights.

In December the Department of State submitted the Report on Human Rights Abuses and Censorship in North Korea to Congress, identifying three entities and three North Korean officials responsible for or associated with serious human rights abuses or censorship.

The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country. The United States has made clear that addressing human rights, including religious freedom, would significantly improve prospects for closer ties between the two countries. Senior U.S. government officials, including the Vice President, met with defectors and NGOs that focused on the country, including some Christian humanitarian organizations.

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