

# **DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2017 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 right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and in many instances, violations of human rights committed by the government constituted crimes against humanity. In August the UN secretary-general and in September the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK released reports reiterating concerns about the country’s use of arbitrary executions, political prison camps, and torture amounting to crimes against humanity. In March and December, the UN Human Rights Council and UN General Assembly plenary session, respectively, adopted resolutions by consensus that “condemned in the strongest terms the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations,” including denial of the right to religious freedom, and urged the government to acknowledge such violations and take immediate steps to implement relevant recommendations by the United Nations. A South Korean nongovernmental organization (NGO) said there were 1,304 cases of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief by DPRK authorities during the year, including 119 killings and 87 disappearances. The country in the past deported, detained, and sometimes released foreigners who allegedly engaged in religious activity within its borders. Reports indicated DPRK authorities released one foreign Christian in August. According to NGOs and academics, the government’s policy toward religion was 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 made 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. The United States cosponsored resolutions at the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council condemning the government’s systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations. In October the Department of State submitted the Report

on Human Rights Abuses and Censorship in North Korea to Congress, the third biannual report to Congress identifying two entities and seven 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 December 22, 2017, 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 25.2 million (July 2017 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 Cheondoism, 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. In a 2012 report, Cornerstone Ministries International (CMI) stated that it was in contact with 37,000 churchgoers in the country. CMI estimated 10-45 percent of those imprisoned in detention camps were Christians. 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 “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 HRNK, the law banning “superstitious activities” is specifically intended to prohibit fortune telling and enable the imprisonment of fortune tellers.

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 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.

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.

The country has in the past detained foreigners allegedly engaging in religious work within its borders. Reports indicated that authorities released one foreign Christian in August.

The NKDB aggregated 1,304 cases of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief by authorities within the country during the year. Charges included propagation of religion, possession of religious materials, religious activity, and contact with religious practitioners. Of the 1,304 cases, DPRK authorities reportedly detained 770 (59 percent), restricted movement of 133 (10.2 percent), killed 119 (9.1 percent), disappeared 87 (6.7 percent), deported or forcibly moved 48 (3.7 percent), and physically injured 44 (3.4 percent). The NKDB had recorded 1,247 such cases in 2016. According to a survey of 11,805 defectors from North Korea referenced in the NKDB white paper, 99.6 percent said there was no religious freedom in the country. Only 4.2 percent of 12,032 defectors said they had seen a Bible when they lived there, although survey data reflected a slight increase in recent years.

According to a South Korea-based NGO, evidence was discovered in 2016 that the organization said confirmed DPRK security entities actively targeted religious practitioners, including Christians and Buddhists and their networks. The NGO stated that the evidence also suggested security officials imprisoned and executed citizens suspected of religious involvement.

According to media reports, activists said DPRK agents killed Korean-Chinese Christian Pastor Han Choong Yeol in April 2016. The pastor operated a church in Changbai, Jilin Province in northeast China, and had provided aid to defectors from North Korea. DPRK authorities said South Korea was responsible for the killing. *Radio Free Asia* reported that on June 3, authorities in Hyesan City beat and arrested a 61-year-old man after he returned from visiting relatives in China. The man had reportedly attended Christian church services and was subsequently charged with espionage.

According to Washington, DC-based NGO North Korean Refugees in the USA, a North Korean defected in May after spending eight years in prison for attending church in China for four months. Reportedly, she was charged with practicing Christianity and learning of its “disgraceful nature.” During her imprisonment, authorities told her up to a dozen times a day to repent of her past and try to “wash” her mind. She reported six other women who were in prison for attending church were either beaten to death or died from diarrhea because they did not have access to medicine.

*The Christian Post* reported in April that Hye Jin Lim of the Seoul-based New Korea Women's Union said Chinese police detained 17 North Korean orphan

defectors, all minors, and repatriated them to North Korea. She said the North Korean security agents found out three of the 17 were Christians because they had “calluses on their knees, as they had been praying for a long time for God to help them.” Authorities reportedly sent them to a political prison camp – an illegal action, according to Lim, because children under the age of 18 should not have been sent to a political prison camp – while they sent the remaining 14 to a reeducation camp.

In August the UN secretary-general and in October the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK released reports reiterating concerns about the country's use of arbitrary executions, political prison camps, and torture amounting to crimes against humanity. In March and December, the UN Human Rights Council and UN General Assembly plenary session, respectively, adopted resolutions by consensus that “condemned in the strongest terms long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations,” including denial of the right to religious freedom, and urged the government to acknowledge such violations of human rights and take immediate steps to end all such violations and abuses through the implementation of relevant recommendations by the United Nations. The annual resolutions 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 religion independently and publicly without fear of punishment, reprisal, or surveillance.

Defectors reported 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 the South Korean government-affiliated Korea Institute for National Unification's (KINU) 2017 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 11,730 refugees between 2007 and April 2016 by the NKDB found 99.6 percent said there was no religious freedom in the country.

Defectors reported that the ruling party prohibited members from practicing religion.

*Juche*, or "self reliance," and *Suryong*, or "supreme leader," remained important ideological underpinnings of the government and the cult of personalities 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.

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 that government authorities continued to react by taking measures against the practice of shamanism. In October HRNK reported that at least one individual had recently been imprisoned for fortune telling and other "crimes." Defector reports cited an increase in party members consulting fortune tellers in order to gauge the best time to defect.

According to the NKDB, the South Korean government estimated as of 2016 there were 121 religious facilities in North Korea, including 60 Buddhist temples, 52 Cheondoist 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 that 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 Life-Giving Trinity Russian Orthodox Church. 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. Reports from visitors taken to these churches to attend services when visiting Pyongyang reported local citizens in attendance appeared to have been brought in for the occasion, and they seemed to be observers rather than participants. 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 who they believed lingered too long outside these churches to listen to the music or consistently drove past them around 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 2017 KINU white paper, no Protestant or Catholic churches existed in the country except in Pyongyang.

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. 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 anywhere in the country.

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

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

In its 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” According to the 2017 KINU report, however, while some Pyongyang residents had heard of them, most persons living outside Pyongyang were not aware of the existence of such family churches. Those who were aware of their existence were not able to identify them as places of worship. According to a survey of 11,967 defectors cited in the 2017 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 that 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 2017 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 August NK News, an independent news provider based outside the country, reported the government recently 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. In May 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 that 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 that 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 that citizens continued to receive education from authorities at least twice a year emphasizing ways to detect and identify individuals who engage in spreading Christianity.

The government reportedly was 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 tightened 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.

### **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 that 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.

During the year, 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 practicing 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.

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. According KINU, some foreign Christians who visited the country said church activities seemed staged, and added they witnessed the door of the church was closed when they attempted to visit without prior consultation.

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. It used other mechanisms to address religious freedom concerns.

The United States cosponsored resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council in March and December that condemned the country's "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations." The resolutions further expressed grave concern over the country's denial of the right 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.

On October 26, the Department of State submitted the third biannual *Report on Human Rights Abuses and Censorship in North Korea* to Congress. The report identified two entities and seven government officials as responsible for or associated with serious human rights abuses or censorship. The report stated, "The government also maintains an extensive system of forced labor through its rigid controls over workers, and restricts the exercise of freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, religion or belief, and movement."

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 Deputy Secretary of State and the Special Representative for North Korea Policy, met with defectors and NGOs that focused on the country, including some Christian humanitarian organizations.

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 December 22, 2017, 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.