

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion for its citizens and the country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; however religious freedom does not exist in practice. The UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on the Human Rights Situation of the DPRK released its final report in February, which concluded that there was an almost complete denial by the government of the right to freedom of religion; the government engaged in crimes against humanity in suppressing these and other rights; and the leadership of the country should be brought before the International Criminal Court (ICC) on these grounds. In December the UN General Assembly approved a resolution condemning the status of human rights in North Korea. Reports indicate the resolution could possibly pave the way for Kim Jong Un and other government leaders to be referred to the ICC.

The government's policy towards religion has been to maintain an appearance of tolerance for international audiences, while suppressing internally all non-state-sanctioned religious activities. Due to the country's inaccessibility and lack of timely information, arrests and punishments remained difficult to verify. The government press has reported, however, that several foreigners have been detained or convicted for religious activity.

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

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the country. The U.S. Secretary of State first designated the country a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in 2001 for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and most recently redesignated it in July. The United States co-sponsored resolutions at the March Human Rights Council session and the UN General Assembly condemning the country's systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 24.9 million (July 2014 estimate). In a 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government

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reported there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Roman Catholics in the country. The report noted that the Cheondogyo Young Friends Party, a government-approved group based on a traditional religious movement, had approximately 15,000 practitioners. South Korean and other foreign religious groups estimate the number of religious practitioners in the country is considerably higher. The UN estimates there are between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Article 68 of the constitution provides for freedom of religion. It further provides, however, that “religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the state and social order.”

In October the country released its own “2014 Report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies” that states “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. Especially, the Government prevents the religion from being used to draw in foreign forces or harm the state and social order.”

Ownership of Bibles or other religious materials is reportedly illegal and punishable by imprisonment and severe punishment, including, in some cases, execution.

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.

In February the 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; the government engaged in crimes against humanity in suppressing these and other

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rights; and the leadership of the country should be brought before the ICC on these grounds. The conclusion the government had engaged in crimes against humanity in repressing religious and other freedoms and the appeal to have the government brought before the ICC was repeated in October by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in the DPRK.

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 of the government. The report concluded that Christians faced persecution, violence, and heavy punishment if they practiced their religion outside the state-controlled churches.

The government-controlled press reported the arrest and imprisonment, and in some cases release, of several foreigners, some possibly in connection with religious activities. South Korean media also reported a South Korean Baptist missionary was sentenced to life in a labor camp. International press reported an Australian missionary was released after 13 days of detention and interrogation for distributing religious pamphlets. In October the government released a U.S. citizen who reported in the press that he left a Bible in a public place and had been detained since May. In November a U.S. citizen who had previously engaged in missionary activity was released after having been convicted and sentenced to 15 years hard labor in 2012.

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 Seoul-based Korea Institute for National Unification’s (KINU’s) “White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2014”, Article 68 of the constitution continued to be used as a tool to oppress religious freedom.

Juche, or self-reliance, remained an important ideological underpinning of the government and the cult of personalities of the late Kim Il-sung, 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 state the *Juche* philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resemble a form of civil religion. Approximately 100,000 *Juche* research centers

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reportedly exist throughout the country. The 2014 report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies stated that while unforced, “every citizen has chosen to follow the *Juche* Idea...and is firmly believing in *Juche* Idea thinking and acting according to its requirement.”

According to the KINU white paper, no Protestant or Catholic churches existed in the country except in the capital Pyongyang.

In Pyongyang there were four state-controlled Christian churches: two Protestant churches (Bongsu and Chilgol Churches), a Catholic church, and Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church. 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 worshipping at these churches was unknown. Numerous North Korean defectors from outside of Pyongyang reported no knowledge of these churches.

The Ryongtong Buddhist Temple in Kaesong was refurbished and expanded recently. The 2014 report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies states the Singye Buddhist Temple in Mt. Kungang and the Pobun Buddhist Temple in Mt. Ryongak were newly restored.

This report also affirmed the existence of religious organizations such as the Korean Christians' Federation, the Korean Buddhists' Federation, the Korea Catholic Association (KCA), the Korea Chondoist Society, and the Korean Association of Religionists in the DPRK.

The government-established KCA provided basic services at the Changchun Roman Catholic Church, but had no ties to the Vatican. There were no Catholic priests residing in the country, but visiting priests occasionally celebrated Mass at the Changchun Church. The KCA declined to send North Korean Catholics to attend Pope Francis' Mass in South Korea on August 18, citing the Republic of Korea's refusal to cancel an upcoming joint military drill with the United States as the reason for its decision.

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.

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Two citizens who studied at the Russian Orthodox Seminary in Moscow served as priests at the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country.

The government reportedly allowed certain forms of religious education, including training 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.

In its July 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” According to the 2014 KINU white paper, however, no North Korean defectors interviewed were aware of family churches or worship centers. Observers stated that “family worship centers” may be part of the state-controlled Korean Christians’ Federation.

According to a late 2013 survey of more than 8,000 defectors by the South Korea-based Database Centre for North Korean Human Rights, 99.7 percent of defectors from North Korea said there was no religious freedom in the country and just 4.2 percent said they had seen a Bible when they lived there.

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

Religious and human rights groups outside the country provided numerous reports that members of underground churches were arrested, beaten, tortured, or killed because of their religious beliefs.

The KINU white paper indicated the government used authorized religious entities for external propaganda and political purposes and reported citizens were strictly barred from entering places of worship. According to the white paper, 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 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.

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Little was known about the day-to-day life of religious persons in the country. Members of government-controlled religious groups did not appear to suffer discrimination, but the government reportedly regarded as subversive elements members of underground churches or those connected to missionary activities. 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 that these groups were involved in intelligence gathering.

The government allowed 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 nationals was limited and strictly monitored, and government escorts accompanied them at all times.

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 for fear their activities would be reported to the authorities.

The COI report concluded the messaging from the government to its citizens regarding Christianity clearly suggested ordinary citizens were not permitted to view Christianity positively

Christians were restricted to the bottom hostile class rungs of the *songbun* system, which classifies people on the basis of social class and family background and also includes consideration of political opinion and religion. The classification maximized discrimination in areas such as education, health care, employment, and residence.

The KINU white paper reported credible 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 verify. While some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics estimated there may be 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 refugee reports confirmed unapproved religious

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materials were available and secret religious meetings occurred, spurred by cross-border contact with individuals and groups in China. Some NGOs reported that 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 that congregations arrived and departed services as groups on tour buses, and some observed that the worshipers did not include any children. Some foreigners noted they were not permitted to have contact with worshipers, and others noted 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 to the KINU white paper, defectors reported being unaware of any recognized religious organizations that maintained branches outside of Pyongyang. Religious ceremonies such as weddings and funerals were almost unknown.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the country and has no official presence there; however, it sought to address religious freedom concerns. The U.S. Secretary of State first designated the country a CPC in 2001 for particularly severe violations of religious freedom and most recently redesignated it in July. As required under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the Secretary designated the existing ongoing restrictions to which the country is subject pursuant to sections 402(c)(5) and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment).

In March the United States co-sponsored a resolution adopted by the UN Human Rights Council that condemned the country’s “systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations” that the UN COI found in many instances to constitute crimes against humanity. The resolution further expressed its grave concern over the DPRK’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.

The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments,

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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. U.S. government officials, including the Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea, met with defectors and members of NGOs that are focused on the country.