

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious beliefs. Despite the constitutional guarantee, the 2014 report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on the Human Rights Situation of the DPRK 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. The COI recommended that the UN Security Council refer the situation in the country to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for action in accordance with the Court's jurisdiction. In January and September 2016, the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and in February the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released reports reiterating concerns about the government'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 which "condemned in the strongest terms" longstanding 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 UN. The annual resolutions again welcomed the Security Council's continued consideration of the relevant conclusions and recommendations of the COI. According to news reports, in April a Christian pastor was killed in China close to the border where he had assisted North Koreans in defecting; activists in Seoul told press the pastor was killed by DPRK agents. The DPRK has in the past detained foreigners allegedly engaging in religious work within its borders, and reports indicate at least one foreign Christian remained detained by DPRK authorities. According to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics, 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. The country's inaccessibility and lack of timely information made arrests and punishments difficult to verify. International media reported the country's authorities detained and deported foreigners, possibly in connection with religious activities.

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. There are 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 July the Department of State submitted the Report on Human Rights Abuses and Censorship in North Korea to Congress, the first biannual report to Congress identifying eight entities and 15 North Korean officials, including Kim Jong Un, responsible for or associated with serious human rights abuses or censorship. Since 2001, it 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 October 31, 2016, 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 25.1 million (July 2016 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 that 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 in its 2016 white paper 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. The UN estimates there are between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians in the country. According to a September Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) report, Cornerstone Ministries International (CMI) stated in 2012 that it was in contact with 37,000 churchgoers in the country. CMI said it presumed based on its research that 10-45 percent of those imprisoned in detention camps are Christians. The COI report stated that 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

Article 68 of 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, that "religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the state and social order."

The 2014 *Report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies*, an official government document, 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."

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

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. 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.

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. According to the NKDB, there was a report during the year of disappearances of people who were found to be practicing religion within detention facilities. International NGOs reported any religious activities conducted outside of those that are state-sanctioned, including praying, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, could lead to severe punishment including imprisonment in political prison camps.

In 2015, the NKDB aggregated 1,165 violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief within the DPRK, with charges including propagation of religion, possession of religious items, religious activities, and contact with religious practitioners. According to a survey of 10,000 defectors from North Korea referenced in the 2015 NKDB white paper, 99.6 percent said there was no religious freedom in the country. Just 4.2 percent said they had seen a Bible when they lived there, although survey data reflects a slight increase in recent years.

According to media reports, in April Christian Pastor Han Choong Yeol was killed in China by whom activists said were DPRK agents. The pastor operated a church in Changbai, Jilin Province, and had provided aid to defectors from North Korea. DPRK authorities said South Korea was responsible for the killing.

The DPRK has in the past detained foreigners allegedly engaging in religious work within its borders, and reports indicate at least one foreign Christian remained detained by DPRK authorities.

In January and September the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and in February the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 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 which "condemned in the strongest terms" longstanding 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 UN. 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 of 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-funded Korea Institute for National Unification's (KINU) 2016 *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, while Article 68 of the constitution provides for freedom of religion, the report states "it is practically impossible for North Korean people to have a religion in their daily lives." According to the NKDB, Article 68 of the constitution represents only a nominal freedom granted to supporters, and only when the regime deems it necessary to use it as a policy tool.

Juche, or self-reliance, and *Suryong*, or "supreme leader," remained important ideological underpinnings 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 stated the *Juche* philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resembled a form of state-sponsored theology. Approximately 100,000 *Juche* research centers reportedly exist throughout the country. The government's 2014 *Report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies* stated that, "Every citizen has chosen to follow the *Juche* Idea...and is firmly believing in *Juche* Idea thinking and acting according to its requirement" and that *Juche* is a belief system not forced upon citizens.

While shamanism has always been practiced to some degree in the country, NGOs noted an apparent 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 April an NGO reported a government official was accused of having consulted a fortune teller. According to a defector residing in South Korea, the government repeatedly reinforced the declaration that “fortune telling and superstitious beliefs are toxins that damage society and human beings,” and to only trust a future provided by the state. Defector reports cited an increase in party members consulting fortune tellers in order to gauge the best time to defect.

The NKDB estimated the existence of 121 religious facilities in the country, including 64 Buddhist temples, 52 Cheondoist temples, and five state-controlled Christian churches. The government's 2014 *Report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies* also cited the existence of 64 Buddhist temples, but said that the temples have lost religious significance in the country and only remained as cultural heritage sites or tourist destinations. The KINU white paper counted 60 Buddhist temples, and noted that most North Koreans did not realize Buddhist temples were religious facilities nor see 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 (Jangchung Cathedral), and Holy 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 worshipping at these five churches was unknown, and there was no information available on whether scheduled services were available at these locations. Reports from visitors taken to these churches to attend services when visiting Pyongyang reported local Koreans in attendance appear to have been brought in for the occasion, but they seemed to be observers rather than participants. Numerous defectors from outside of Pyongyang reported no knowledge of these churches, and according to the 2016 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 Christians' Federation (KCF), Korean Buddhists Federation, Korea Catholic Association (KCA), Korea Cheondoist Society, and the Korean Association of Religionists. The NKDB white paper also noted the existence of the Korean Orthodox Church 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 Jangchung 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. Visiting priests reportedly celebrated Mass at the Jangchung Cathedral in the past. In April the South Korean Catholic Archbishop of Gwangju celebrated Easter Mass in Pyongyang following a December 2015 government agreement with the Catholic Church in South Korea to send priests to the country on a “regular basis.”

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 Holy 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 July 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” According to the KINU white paper, however, while some Pyongyang residents had heard of them, most people living outside of 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 more than 9,000 defectors cited in the 2014 NKDB white paper, not one of the defectors had ever seen any of these purported home churches, and only 1.2 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.

The KINU white paper indicated 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. 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.

The NKDB white paper stated that officials conduct 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. NKDB reported that in its survey of more than 10,000 defectors, none reported fleeing in the first instance due to religious persecution, indicating limited knowledge of and access to religion in the country. 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 people 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 the KINU white paper, the government continued to view Christianity in particular as a means of foreign Western encroachment. The white paper 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 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. 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 for 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.

The 2015 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 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 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 worshipers did not include any children. Some foreigners noted they were not permitted to have contact with worshipers, 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 to the KINU white paper, defectors reported being unaware of any recognized religious organizations that maintained branches outside of Pyongyang. Religious ceremonies such as for weddings and funerals were almost unknown.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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, however.

The United States cosponsored resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council that condemned the country's "systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations." The resolutions further expressed 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.

On July 6, the Department of State submitted the first biannual Report on Human Rights Abuses and Censorship in North Korea to Congress. The report identified eight entities and 15 government officials, including Kim Jong Un, 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 DPRK 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 Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea, met with defectors and NGOs that are focused on the country, including some Christian humanitarian organizations.

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