

# DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

Religious freedom does not exist in North Korea despite the constitutional guarantee for the freedom of religion. The February 2014 report of the United Nations 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 constitute 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 2015, the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council adopted resolutions on the human rights situation in the country. Since 2014, these resolutions have encouraged the Security Council to continue its consideration of the relevant conclusions and recommendations of the COI. The government's policy towards religion has been to maintain an appearance of tolerance for international audiences, while suppressing internally all nonstate-sanctioned religious activities. The country's inaccessibility and lack of timely information, make 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.

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the country. 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 February 29, 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. 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.

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### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 24.9 million (July 2015 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 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) reports in its 2014 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. 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**

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 68 of the constitution provides for freedom of religion: “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 “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. 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 brought in from abroad is reportedly illegal and also punishable by imprisonment and severe punishment, including, in some cases, execution.

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### 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.

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. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported any religious activities conducted outside of those that are state-sanctioned, including praying, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, can lead to severe punishment including imprisonment in political prison camps.

In February 2014, the COI published its final report in which it 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 constitute crimes against humanity, and it recommended that the United Nations ensure those most responsible for the crimes against humanity were held accountable. During the year, the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council adopted resolutions on the human rights situation in the DPRK. Since 2014, these resolutions have encouraged the Security Council to continue its consideration of the relevant conclusions and recommendations of the COI.

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.

International media reported the country's authorities detained a Canadian pastor and deported other foreigners in connection with religious activities. In December

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authorities sentenced the Canadian pastor, Lim Hyeon-soo, to life in prison with hard labor. According to state media, his charges included unspecified “anti-DPRK religious activities.”

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) “White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2015,” Article 68 of the constitution continued to be used as a tool to suppress 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 state-sponsored ideology. Approximately 100,000 *Juche* research centers reportedly exist throughout the country. The 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.

Five state-controlled Christian churches continued to exist in Pyongyang: 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 worshiping at these churches was unknown. Reports from visitors who have been 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 North Korean defectors from outside of Pyongyang reported no knowledge of these churches, and according to the KINU white paper, no Protestant or Catholic churches existed in the country except in Pyongyang.

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KINU also reported the existence of state-sanctioned religious organizations in the DPRK such as the Korean Christians’ Federation (KCF), Korean Buddhists Federation, Korea Catholic Association (KCA), Korea Chondoist 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 October the KCF invited to Pyongyang the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK), its South Korean counterpart, for a week of religious meetings. However, the agenda for this meeting reportedly focused primarily on issues unrelated to religious freedom or religious affairs. International media also reported that 150 representatives from seven South Korean religious groups traveled to Mount Kumgang in North Korea for a prayer event hosted by the Korean Conference of Religions for Peace in November. International media also reported that two delegations of South Korean religious leaders visited Protestant and Catholic churches for religious services in Pyongyang and to discuss repairs to Jangchung Cathedral in November. In December the South Korean Catholic Church said it had reached agreement with North Korea to send priests there on a “regular basis,” including for the South Korean Archbishop of Gwangju to deliver Easter Mass in Pyongyang in 2016.

The government-established KCA provided basic services at the Jangchung Roman Catholic Church, 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.

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.

The 2014 report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies cited the existence of 64 Buddhist temples in the DPRK, but noted that the temples have lost religious significance in the country and only remained as cultural heritage sites or tourist destinations. The 2015 KINU white paper noted that most North Koreans

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did not realize Buddhist temples were religious facilities and did not see Buddhist monks as religious figures.

The 2014 NKDB white paper said there were also 52 Cheondoist temples throughout the country.

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.

In its July 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” According to the 2015 KINU white paper, however, while some Pyongyang residents had heard of them, most people living outside of Pyongyang were not even 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.

According to the NKDB white paper, 99.6 percent of defectors from North Korea 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.

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.

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. 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.

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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.

While shamanism has always been practiced to some degree in the country, NGOs noted an apparent increase in shamanistic practices, including Pyongyang. These NGOs reported that government authorities reacted by cracking down on the practice of shamanism.

The KINU white paper indicated the government used 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.

Little was known about the day-to-day life of religious persons. 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 9,000 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 who had contact with Christian missionaries while in China.

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. In October a spokesperson for the foreign ministry accused the United States of working with “religious organizations” to conduct “anti-DPRK operations.”

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

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strictly monitored; and government escorts accompanied them at all times. Some workers of such organizations reported being permitted to take into the country their personal Bibles. In recent years, the government has also allowed South Korean religious groups to renovate and build religious facilities.

Christians were restricted to the lowest, hostile 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.

### 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 that government messaging regarding the purported evils of Christianity led to negative views of Christianity among ordinary citizens.

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 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 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 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



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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. However, it still sought to address religious freedom concerns. 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 February 29, 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.

The United States has cosponsored annual resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council that condemn 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.

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.