

NORTH KOREA

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in North Korea trended the same as in 2017. North Korea (also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) is one of the most isolated and repressed societies in the world. The North Korean regime has an appalling human rights record and places unjust restrictions on its people's inherent right to freedom of religion or belief. The North Korean government maintains totalitarian control over society by espousing and brutally enforcing its own state-generated ideology known as *Juche*. This ideology is inherently self-serving and exists solely to empower the North Korean regime, which treats any expression of independent assembly or thought, including religious practice, as a threat to its very existence. Although the country is officially atheist, the government allows a small handful of state-backed houses of worship to operate. Defectors interviewed after fleeing North Korea often question the legitimacy of these institutions and caution that their congregations may be preselected for the role in order to maintain the illusion of religious freedom for international audiences. Any expression of religion outside this heavily regulated sphere happens in secret, and anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harboring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment. The government has been known to arrest, torture, imprison, and

even execute religious believers and their family members, whether or not they are similarly religious. There are an estimated 80,000–120,000 political prisoners currently languishing in North Korea's notoriously harsh labor camps, as many as 50,000 of whom may be Christians. Inmates at these facilities face dire living conditions and are likely forced to provide hard labor for the advancement of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. As relations grew between the United States and North Korea during the year, so too did the opportunities to raise religious freedom and related human rights with the regime.

Throughout 2018 the North Korean government continued to carry out systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, and USCIRF again finds that North Korea merits designation in 2019 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State repeatedly has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing trade restrictions pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Pressure the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country;
- Make any future discussions regarding the easing or lifting of sanctions contingent upon North Korea's sincere and demonstrable efforts to improve its religious freedom and human rights record consistent with international standards;
- Fill the current vacancy and maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean human rights issues as a full-time, independent position at the State Department and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Include, whenever possible, both the Special Envoy and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in official and unofficial discussions about or with North Korea in order to incorporate human rights and religious freedom into the dialogue, and likewise incorporate human rights and religious freedom concerns into discussions with multilateral partners regarding denuclearization and security, as appropriate; and
- Expand existing radio programming transmitted into North Korea and along the border, as well as the dissemination of other forms of information technology, such as mobile phones, thumb drives, and DVDs, and facilitation of improved internet access so North Koreans have greater access to independent sources of information.



COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

GOVERNMENT

Single-party state; official state ideology of "*Juche*" or "national self-reliance"

POPULATION

25,381,085

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Government-sponsored religious groups (e.g., the Korean Religious Practitioners Association, the Korean Christian Federation, the Korean Buddhist Federation, the Korean

Catholic Association, the Korean Chondokyo Central Committee, and the Korean Orthodox Committee) exist to provide the illusion of religious freedom

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

(Note: figures are outdated and difficult to confirm)

<1% Christian

Other groups: historical traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism, as well as Chondoism (also spelled Cheondoism), a local religious movement

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook, the U.S. Department of State, and the Korea Institute for National Unification

BACKGROUND

The North Korean regime's approach toward religion and belief is among the most repressive in the world. Its governing style is communist-like (although all references to communism were removed from the constitution in 2009), and the regime maintains totalitarian control over North Korean society by espousing and brutally enforcing its own state-generated ideology known as *Juche*. This ideology is inherently self-serving and exists solely to empower the North Korean regime. It engenders cult-like devotion and deification of the country's current leader, Kim Jong-un. His father and grandfather before him enjoyed the same god-like status. Many *Juche* concepts amount to idol-worship and thus run counter to some religious doctrines. Even the slightest resistance or hesitation to accept Kim Jong-un as the supreme authority, for religious or other reasons, is treated as political subversion and severely punished.

North Korea is one of the most isolated societies in the world and its government refuses to tolerate any form of expression or independent thought, including religion or belief—even though these rights are nominally protected by the constitution. That is not to say religion is entirely absent in the officially atheist DPRK, but those

who choose to follow a religion place themselves in grave danger. The United Nations (UN) issued a report in 2002 estimating that somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 of North Korea's inhabitants identify as Christian. No more recent figures were available at the end of the reporting period. North Koreans are also influenced by the country's historical Buddhist, Confucian, and Shamanist traditions, along with an indigenous religious movement known as Chondoism. It is not known how many North Koreans adhere to these beliefs. Those who practice a religion most often keep their faith a secret, sometimes from immediate family members, due to well-founded fears of draconian and multigenerational familial punishment.

The North Korean regime has traditionally looked inward to reinforce its legitimacy, often through fiery rhetoric that overstates external threats, extensive military spending, and further development of its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. This is almost always at the expense of the impoverished North Korean people's basic needs and fundamental rights. In 2018, however, Pyongyang scaled back its characteristically aggressive discourse in favor of more conventional diplomacy. This may indicate a desire for greater inclusion and legitimacy

in the international system. For example, the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea spurred a series of promising diplomatic initiatives, including three inter-Korean summits and a pledge by North Korea to suspend all future nuclear and ballistic missile testing.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Freedom of religion or belief does not exist in North Korea. Even basic awareness of religion as a concept is uncommon, and defector interviews suggest the North Korean government's restrictions on religion have only grown more severe over time. Although the North Korean constitution protects its people's freedom of religion in principle, in practice the regime exerts absolute influence over a handful of state-controlled houses of worship permitted to exist. This creates a facade of religious life maintained chiefly for propaganda purposes. All religious activities occurring outside this heavily regulated domain are severely restricted. Some religious materials are smuggled into the country, mostly from China, but provisions in North Korea's Criminal Code render simple possession of foreign religious materials illegal. Anyone found to be in violation of this code is subject to punitive action, including arrest, torture, beatings, and execution.

The North Korean regime fears its people organizing socially or politically, as these activities occur beyond the immediate purview of state institutions. Following this logic, the government interprets any expression of religion or belief as a threat to its very existence. In 2018, North Koreans of faith continued to face persecution for spreading religious doctrine, having contact with known religious believers, possessing religious items, or engaging in religious activities, even in the privacy of their own homes.

Christianity

The North Korean government associates Christianity with the West, particularly the United States, and thus singles out Christians as the greatest religious threat. The regime utilizes a sophisticated surveillance apparatus to actively pursue and imprison Christians

practicing their faith in secret. Their immediate and extended family members are often incarcerated as well, whether or not they are similarly religious. The State Department estimates there are between 80,000 and 120,000 political prisoners currently languishing in North Korea's notoriously harsh labor camps, known as *kwanliso*. Up to 50,000 of these detainees are believed to be Christians. Inmates in these facilities are detained indefinitely and face hard labor—likely to advance the development of nuclear weapons and other military equipment—along with starvation, torture, and arbitrary execution. Defectors report that prison authorities often single out prisoners for more severe treatment if they are suspected of being Christian or having contact with Christians.

There is an alleged network of underground churches in North Korea but the highly sensitive nature of their activities renders information regarding their locations and congregation size nearly impossible to

confirm. A 2017 report by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) found that while some Pyongyang residents had heard of these secret churches, very few could offer specific information.

Virtually no residents outside the capital had knowledge of their existence, and many North Korean defectors have questioned whether they exist at all.

Some North Koreans can access faith-based programming by tuning in to the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC), South Korea's most prominent religious radio program. The station broadcasts defector-run audio sermons and informational programming about Christianity. FEBC also donates radio receivers to Christian organizations that then work with smugglers to bring the radios inside North Korea. There are no prohibitions against owning a radio in North Korea, and they are not brought inside with any preset stations. However, North Koreans who tune in to FEBC broadcasts do so at great risk to themselves and their families.

According to the State Department, state-run religious institutions include three Protestant churches, a Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church, and one Catholic church. Reports indicate that sermons at these official

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religious institutions may focus more on progovernment propaganda than religious principles. The sole Catholic church is not affiliated with the Holy See and therefore holds services without a priest. According to research published by South Korean Catholic priest Kim Yeon-su, the single Catholic church in North Korea has about 3,000 members. Also, the Korean Christian Federation (KCF) reportedly holds government-approved services in informal house settings. Some defectors caution, however, that the congregations of state-sanctioned religious facilities are likely assigned or preselected for the role in order to help maintain the illusion of religious freedom. Nonetheless, some international Christian organizations have over the years maintained continued engagement with state-run religious institutions and noted what they view as genuine theological depth in their sermons.

In what could be a promising development, in October 2018 Kim Jong-un extended a private invitation to Pope Francis to visit North Korea. Pope Francis stated that he would consider a visit if the invitation came through official channels. He also noted that certain unspecified conditions would have to be met. One Vatican official stated that even if these conditions were met, the Pope's schedule would not likely permit a visit anytime in 2019. No pope has ever visited North Korea, so such a trip would be historic, but it also raises concerns that Pope Francis' presence would simply be used to legitimize the official state-backed version of the Catholic faith.

North Korean Refugees

Since the Korean War ended in 1953, between 100,000 and 300,000 North Koreans have fled the country to escape famine, persecution, and human rights abuses. With the near-complete absence of transparency regarding conditions on the ground in North Korea, these individuals are a valuable source of information. The vast majority of North Korean defectors escape through the shared 880-mile border with China. The border is fairly porous and the region itself poorly patrolled. China is the final destination for some, while for others it is the first stop in a complex route spanning

multiple countries and culminating in South Korea, where defectors are typically granted citizenship shortly after their arrival. Both options are objectively safer than fleeing directly across the heavily fortified border with South Korea, but defectors crossing over into China still face significant challenges. Those who remain in China must cope with linguistic and cultural barriers and are not legally permitted to work. This leaves them open to various forms of exploitation, and many female defectors find themselves sold into marriage against their will or forced into prostitution.

The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and deports them back to their country of origin when they are discovered. By most accounts, Chinese authorities conspire with their North Korean counterparts to actively track, hunt down, detain, and forcefully repatriate North Koreans attempting to cross over into China. This is in direct violation of China's obligations under the 1951

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UN Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. All would-be defectors are treated harshly upon their repatriation. North Korean authorities often explicitly ask if the returnees encountered Christian missionaries

outside the country. If they answer affirmatively, they are likely to face torture in addition to serving a lengthy prison sentence.

U.S. POLICY

As noted in the Commission's November 2018 [Policy Update on Religious Freedom and Related Human Rights in North Korea](#), relations between the United States and North Korea improved throughout the reporting period. In June 2018, President Donald J. Trump and Kim Jong-un met face to face for the first time in Singapore. Shortly thereafter, President Trump stated he would suspend large-scale joint military exercises with South Korea. These exercises have been a longstanding source of contention in U.S.-DPRK relations. For his part, Kim Jong-un approved modest efforts to dismantle known nuclear and ballistic missile testing facilities and saw to the return of at least 55

boxes believed to contain the remains of U.S. servicemen lost in the Korean War.

In May 2018, the North Korean government released three American prisoners—Kim Dong Chul, Kim Hak Song, and Kim Sang Duk. This goodwill gesture marked the first occasion since 2012 that North Korea held no U.S. citizens in captivity. North Korea has in the past arbitrarily detained U.S. nationals within its borders and extracted false confessions intended to damage the United States’ reputation. For this reason, in August 2018 the State Department [extended](#) its ban on U.S. citizens traveling to North Korea, citing lingering concerns over the risk of politically motivated arrest and detention. Since the ban was first imposed in 2017, various humanitarian and development organizations have cited greater difficulty carrying out their work inside the country. Some have expressed desire for the U.S. government to streamline its review process and more leniently grant exceptions in order to facilitate aid to the North Korean people.

Discussions at the June 2018 summit in Singapore focused primarily on the final, fully verified denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but it is clear there is a growing awareness within the administration that human rights and security are not mutually exclusive. Shortly after the meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [tweeted](#) that President Trump used the occasion to also raise concerns over religious freedom and the status of Japanese abductees. The summit concluded with the issuance of a [joint statement](#) in which both sides agreed to improve relations and work toward denuclearization. How they plan to operationalize this agreement is not yet clear. A second summit occurred in February 2019, after the reporting period, in Hanoi, Vietnam.

In July 2018, President Trump signed the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-198) into law and it is presently authorized until 2022. The act delineates various human rights concerns in North Korea, including the persecution of religious minorities and what could be described as enforced worship of the Kim family. The act also acknowledges the Chinese government’s complicity in crimes against

humanity by failing to adhere to its obligation to uphold the principle of nonrefoulement in its repeated, forceful repatriation of North Korean refugees.

The Trump administration later underscored religious freedom and related human rights in North Korea at the July 2018 [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) hosted by Secretary Pompeo. North Korean defector Ji Hyeona addressed the Ministerial, describing how North Korean authorities imprisoned and tortured her for possessing a Bible. In remarks at the Ministerial, Vice President Michael R. Pence [said](#), “There is no escaping the plain fact that North Korea’s leadership has exacted unparalleled privation and cruelty upon its people for decades.”

The U.S. government continues to comply with the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 ([P.L. 114-122](#)), as amended by the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act ([P.L. 115-44](#)). For example, in December 2018 the U.S. Department of the Treasury [imposed](#) targeted, unilateral sanctions against three North Korean officials for their role in human rights abuses and censorship. The sanctions corresponded with the State Department’s release of a [report](#) on human rights and censorship in North Korea that is similarly required by the act.

Beginning in 2014, the UN Security Council has convened each year to discuss human rights in North Korea. This meeting, slated to convene in December 2018, was postponed because the United States was unable to persuade at least nine of the 15 Member States to cast a “yes” vote in favor of having the discussion. American diplomats indicated they hope the discussion will occur sometime early in 2019.

On November 28, 2018, the State Department re-designated North Korea as a CPC for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department has also consistently placed restrictions on North Korea under the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of the Trade Act of 1974, which Congress developed to deny normal trade relations to communist countries known for their severe human rights abuses, and which has since been used to restrict trade with countries like North Korea.