

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Although the constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, in practice the government severely restricted religious activity, except for some officially recognized groups it tightly supervised. The trend in the government’s respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. Genuine religious freedom did not exist. Government practices continued to interfere with individuals’ ability to choose and to manifest their religious beliefs. The government continued to repress the religious activities of unauthorized religious groups. Reports by refugees, defectors, missionaries, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) indicated that the authorities arrested and subjected to harsh penalties persons engaged in religious proselytizing and those in unauthorized contact with foreigners or missionaries. Defectors stated that they witnessed or heard of arrests and possible executions of underground Christian church members in prior years. Due to the country’s inaccessibility and the inability of foreigners to gain timely information, the continuation of arrests and punishments during the year remained difficult to verify. The government allowed foreigners to attend government-sponsored religious services.

There were no reports available on societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the country. Since 2001, the secretary of state has designated it a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The secretary of state redesignated the country a CPC in August 2011. The U.S. government raised concerns about the state of religious freedom in the country with bilateral partners and in multilateral fora.

The country does not allow journalists, representatives of foreign governments, or other invited guests the freedom of movement that would enable them to assess the status of religious freedom or confirm reported abuses. Some reports relying on defector testimony were dated because of the time elapsed between departure from the country and contact with NGOs or officials able to document human rights conditions.

Section I. Religious Demography

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According to U.S. government sources, the population is estimated at 24.6 million. In a 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Commission, the country's government reports there are 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Roman Catholics. The report also notes that the Cheondogyo Young Friends Party, a government-approved group based on a traditional religious movement, has approximately 15,000 members. South Korean and other foreign religious groups estimate there is a considerably higher number of religious practitioners in the country.

In Pyongyang there are four state-controlled Christian churches: two Protestant churches (Bongsu and Chilgol Churches), the Changchun Roman Catholic Church, and the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church. The Chilgol Church is dedicated to the memory of former leader Kim Il-Sung's mother, Kang Pan-sok, who was a Presbyterian deaconess. The number of regular worshippers at these churches is unknown. Defectors from outside of Pyongyang have no knowledge of these churches.

As part of its 2009 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the government reports the existence of religious organizations such as the Korea Christian Federation, Korea Buddhists' Federation, Korea Roman Catholic Association, Korea Chondoist Society, and Korea Religionists' Society.

The government-established Korean Catholic Association (KCA) provides for basic services at the Changchun Church, but has no ties with the Vatican. There are no Catholic priests residing in the country. Visiting priests occasionally provide Mass at the Changchun Church.

According to religious leaders who have traveled to the country, there are Protestant pastors at the Bongsu and Chilgol Churches, although it is not known whether they are resident or visiting pastors.

In its July 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reports the existence of 500 "family worship centers." However, according to the 2012 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) White Paper, defectors were unaware of any such centers. Observers stated that "family worship centers" may be part of the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation, while an unknown number of "underground churches" operate apart from the federation and are not recognized by the government. The 2012 KINU White Paper and the 2007 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report, "A Prison Without Bars,"

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include defector testimonies referencing the existence of underground churches, but conclude that their existence was hard to verify.

In July 2009 the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper reported an estimated 30,000 Christians, while some NGOs and academics estimate there may be up to several hundred thousand “underground” Christians. Others question the existence of a large-scale underground church or conclude that it is impossible to estimate accurately the number of underground religious believers. Individual underground congregations are reportedly very small and typically confined to private homes.

According to the 2012 KINU White Paper, there are an estimated 60 Buddhist temples. Most are regarded as cultural relics, but religious activity is permitted in some. Monks serve as caretakers in many of these temples and foreign visitors find these monks to be knowledgeable about Buddhism. Based on defector testimony, the 2012 KINU White Paper reports that most residents of the country have not heard about Buddhist scriptures and have never seen a Buddhist monk. State-controlled press reported on several occasions that Buddhist ceremonies took place in various locations.

The Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church opened in Pyongyang in 2006.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom. The constitution also stipulates, however, that religion “should not be used for purposes of dragging in foreign powers or endangering public security.”

In its 2009 report for the UN Human Rights Council UPR, the government contends that the state and religion are separate and that all religions are equal. In addition the government states that religious practitioners are free to have a religious life and to perform ceremonies according to their own religious rules at family worship centers and other facilities.

“Juche,” or self-reliance, remains an important ideological underpinning of the government, and the cult of personality of the late Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong Il extends to Kim Jong Un. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority, exemplifying the state and society’s needs, is regarded as opposition to the national interest and sometimes results in severe punishment.

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Some scholars claim that the “Juche” philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resembles a civil religion. Approximately 100,000 “Juche” research centers reportedly exist throughout the country.

The government does not observe any religious holidays as national holidays.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees. In practice the government severely restricted religious freedom and discouraged organized religious activities except those controlled by officially recognized groups.

The government dealt harshly with all opponents, including those who engaged in religious practices deemed unacceptable. Religious and human rights groups outside the country provided numerous reports in previous years that members of underground churches were arrested, beaten, tortured, or killed because of their religious beliefs. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 political prisoners were believed to be held in the political prison camp system in remote areas, some for religious reasons. Prison conditions were harsh, and refugees and defectors who had been in prison stated that prisoners who had contact with foreign missionaries or foreigners were generally treated worse than other inmates.

The 2012 KINU White Paper cited defector testimony that the wife of a Chinese military officer was publically executed for possession of a Bible in 2009 in North Hamgyeong Province, and that a family of three was taken to a political prison camp in 2011 for conducting a family worship service in Sambong-gu, Onseong-gun, North Hamgyeong Province. According to additional defector testimony in the KINU White Paper, one person caught praying was sentenced to prison.

The North Korean Human Rights Database Center reported in September that according to four defectors, authorities arrested former Musan county Jucho-gu Women’s Union Leader Cha Young Hee on February 7, 1998 for engaging in religious activities and passing out Bibles. Cha was transferred through the North Hamgyong Province Musan county Military Security Agency to the Provincial State Security Agency, and later transferred once more after interrogation to an unidentified prison. Cha died two years and nine months later, presumably as a result of torture.

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In its 2012 report *Songbun: Marked for Life, North Korea's Social Classification System* the U.S.-based NGO Committee for Human Rights in North Korea stated that all religious individuals were regarded as enemies of the state. The report also noted that religion was used as part of the "songbun," a system by which families were classified according to their loyalty to the government. The songbun system determined access to education and health care, employment opportunities, place of residence, and marriage prospects.

NGOs and defectors reported that among those the government executed in recent years were individuals who engaged in religious activities such as proselytizing and having contact with foreign missionaries or other religious foreigners. Some North Koreans crossed the border into China; if returned by Chinese authorities or caught by the North Korean police, they typically were questioned about their activities in China, including contact with religious organizations or church attendance. Defectors reported the government punished those who had contact with South Korean humanitarian or religious groups or missionaries in China.

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. Despite these restrictions, reports indicated that contacts with religious personnel both inside the country and across the border in China appeared to be increasing. However, there was not enough data to determine the size and scope of religious activity. Reports from NGOs, defectors, and missionaries indicated that persons engaged in proselytizing or with ties to overseas evangelical groups operating across the border in China were arrested and subjected to harsh punishment.

Government practices severely restricted the practice of religion. The 2012 KINU White Paper indicated the government utilized authorized religious entities for external propaganda and political purposes, and citizens were strictly barred from entering places of worship. Ordinary citizens considered such sites primarily "sightseeing spots for foreigners." KINU concluded that the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated that ordinary citizens did not enjoy religious freedom.

Two citizens who studied at the Russian Orthodox Seminary in Moscow were ordained as priests and served at the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church. The purported aim of the church was to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country, but one religious leader with access to the country speculated that the church likely extended pastoral care to Orthodox Koreans as well.

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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, while members of underground churches or those connected to missionary activities were reportedly regarded as subversive elements. Some reports claimed, and circumstantial evidence suggested, that many if not most of the government-controlled religious organizations were created for propaganda and political purposes, including meeting with foreign religious visitors. There were also reports that the government channeled funds and goods donated to government-approved churches to the Korean Workers Party, the country's only political party. There were unconfirmed reports that nonreligious children of religious believers were employed in mid-level positions in the government. In the past, nonreligious children of believers reportedly sometimes suffered broad discrimination, including severe penalties or imprisonment.

Beginning in the late 1980s, as part of the campaign highlighting Kim Il Sung's "benevolent politics," the government allowed the formation of several government-sponsored religious organizations. Foreigners who met with representatives of these organizations believed that some members were genuinely religious, but noted that others appeared to know little about religious doctrine. According to NGOs, these religious organizations were organized primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organizations and international aid agencies, rather than as instruments to guarantee and support free religious activities. Only officially recognized religious groups enjoyed the constitutional right, provided since 1992, to conduct authorized religious gatherings and "to construct buildings for religious use." Ownership of Bibles or other religious materials was reportedly illegal and punishable by imprisonment or in some cases execution.

The authorities renovated or restored a number of Buddhist temples and relics in recent years, under a broad effort aimed at "preserving the Korean nation's cultural heritage."

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.

During the year, the government allowed some overseas faith-based aid organizations to operate inside the country to provide humanitarian assistance. Such organizations reported that they were not allowed to proselytize, their contact

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

Several foreigners residing in Pyongyang regularly attended Korean language services at the Christian churches. Some foreigners who visited the country stated that church services appeared staged and, in addition to religious themes, contained political content supportive of the government. Other foreigners who visited the country noted the appearance of genuine worship among some participants. Foreign legislators who attended services in Pyongyang in previous years noted 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 that they were not permitted to have contact with worshipers; others noted limited interaction with them. Foreign observers had limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups, but it was generally assumed that they were monitored closely. According to the 2012 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.

Several religious education schools existed in the country. There were three-year colleges for training Protestant and Buddhist clergy. A religious studies program was established at Kim Il Sung University in 1989; its graduates usually worked in the foreign trade sector. In 2000, a Protestant seminary was reopened with assistance from foreign missionary groups. Critics, including at least one foreign sponsor, charged that the government opened the seminary only to facilitate reception of assistance funds from foreign faith-based NGOs. The Chosun Christian Federation, a religious group believed to be controlled by the government, contributed to the curriculum used by the seminary. The Chosun Christian League operated the Pyongyang Theological Academy, a graduate institution that trained pastors affiliated with the Korean Christian Federation. The Bongsu Church reportedly ran a theological seminary. Reports from October 2009 indicated that 12 students studied there.

Former government security agents who defected to South Korea reported intensified police activity aimed at halting religious activity at the border.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

No information was available on societal attitudes toward religious freedom.

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

Some NGOs reported that individual underground churches were connected to each other through well-established networks. It was not possible to confirm such claims, however.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reportedly contributed to humanitarian projects administered by the Bongsu Church.

The Jogye Order, the largest Buddhist sect in South Korea, announced on October 23 that it agreed with its North Korean counterpart during an October 16-17 meeting in Shenyang, China, to launch a joint project to excavate and restore Buddhist relics near Pyongyang.

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 as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The country was first designated a CPC in 2001 for particularly severe violations of religious freedom and most recently redesignated by the secretary of state in August 2011. 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).

The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in multilateral fora and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country. U.S. officials made clear that addressing human rights, including religious freedom, would have a significant effect on improving the prospects for closer ties between the two countries. U.S. government officials, including representatives from the Office of International Religious Freedom and the special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, continued to meet with defectors and members of NGOs focused on the country.

In December the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, cosponsored by the United States, condemning the country’s poor human rights record and expressing “very serious concern” at “the persistence of reports of systemic, widespread, and

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grave violations of human rights.” The resolution called on the country to fulfill its obligations under human rights instruments to which it was a party, and urged the government to invite UN special representatives to visit and ensure that humanitarian organizations had free access to the country.