



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2010 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [East Asia and Pacific](#) » [Korea, Democratic People's Republic of](#)

Korea, Democratic People's Republic of

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief;" however, in practice the government severely restricted religious activity, except that which was supervised tightly by officially recognized groups linked to the government. Genuine religious freedom does not exist.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period, and government policy continued to interfere with the individual's ability to choose and to manifest his or her religious belief. The government continued to repress the religious activities of unauthorized religious groups.

Recent refugee, defector, missionary, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports indicated religious persons engaging in proselytizing in the country, and those who have been in contact with foreigners or missionaries have been arrested and subjected to harsh penalties. Refugees and defectors continued to say they witnessed the arrest and possible execution of underground Christian church members by the government in prior years. Due to the country's inaccessibility and the inability to gain timely information, the continuation of this activity during the reporting period 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 the country a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. government raised its concerns about the state of human rights in the country with bilateral partners and in multilateral forums.

The government does not allow representatives of foreign governments, journalists, or other invited guests freedom of movement that would enable them to assess fully human rights conditions or confirm reported abuses. This report is based on information from interviews; press reports; South Korean government reports; reports by think tanks and NGOs;

as well as missionary, refugee, and defector testimony obtained over the past decade, supplemented where possible by information drawn from more recent reports from visitors to the country. Information submitted as part of the country's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations Human Rights Council was also used.

Refugee and defector testimony was often dated because of the time lapse between departures from the country and contact with organizations able to document human rights conditions. This report cites specific sources and time frames wherever possible, and reports were corroborated to the extent possible. While limited in detail, the information in this report is indicative of the situation with regard to religious freedom in the country in recent years.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 46,500 square miles and a population of 22.7 million. The number of religious believers was unknown but was estimated by the North Korean government in a 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Commission to be 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Catholics. Estimates by South Korean and international church-related groups were considerably higher. In addition the Chondogyo Young Friends Party or Cheondongkyoists, a government-approved group based on a traditional religious movement, had approximately 15,000 practitioners, according to the Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) 2009 white paper and a 2002 North Korean government report to the UN.

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 congregants regularly worshipping at these churches is unknown. Numerous defectors from outside of Pyongyang have reported no knowledge of these churches.

As part of its 2009 UPR, the country reported 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 resident in the country to serve the community, but visiting priests occasionally provide Mass at Pyongyang's Changchun Church.

According to religious leaders who 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. The Presbyterian Church in the USA has reportedly contributed to humanitarian projects administered by Bongsu Church.

In its July 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 "family worship centers;" however, according to the 2009 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" operated apart from the federation and are not recognized by the government. The 2009 KINU white paper and the 2007 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report "A Prison Without Bars" included defector testimonies referencing the existence of underground churches but concluded that their existence is hard to verify. In July 2009 the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper reported an estimated 30,000 Christians, while some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics estimated there may be up to several hundred thousand underground Christians in the country. Others questioned the existence of a large-scale underground church or concluded

that it was impossible to accurately estimate the number of underground religious believers. Individual underground congregations were reportedly very small and typically confined to private homes. At the same time, some NGOs reported individual churches were connected to each other through well-established networks. The government has not allowed outsiders access to confirm such claims.

According to the 2009 KINU White Paper, there were an estimated 60 Buddhist temples. Most were regarded as cultural relics, but religious activity was permitted in some. Monks served as caretakers in many of these temples; foreign visitors have found these monks to be knowledgeable about Buddhism. A few Buddhist temples and relics have been renovated or restored in recent years under a broad effort aimed at "preserving the Korean nation's cultural heritage." In 2007 reconstruction was completed on the Shingye or Singyesa (Holy Valley) Temple, which was destroyed during the Korean War. The South Korean Government and foreign tourists funded the reconstruction. A South Korean monk, the first to permanently reside in North Korea, has lived at the temple since 2004 but serves primarily as a guide for visiting tourists rather than as a pastor ministering to local Buddhists.

State-controlled press reported on several occasions that Buddhist ceremonies had been carried out in various locations. Official reporting also linked descriptions of such ceremonies with the broader theme of Korean unification.

The Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church opened in Pyongyang in 2006. Chairman Kim Jong-il reportedly commissioned the church after he visited an Orthodox cathedral in Russia in 2002. Two North Koreans who studied at the Russian Orthodox Seminary in Moscow were ordained as priests and are serving at the church. The purported aim of the church was primarily to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country, but one religious leader with access to the country speculated the church likely extended pastoral care to Orthodox Koreans.

Several foreigners residing in Pyongyang attended Korean-language services at the Christian churches on a regular basis. Some foreigners who visited the country stated that church services appeared staged and contained political content supportive of the government, in addition to religious themes. Other foreigners who visited the country noted the appearance of genuine worship among some participants. Foreign legislators attending services in Pyongyang in previous years noted that congregations arrived at 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 they were monitored closely. According to the 2009 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 also 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 runs a theological seminary. In October 2009 12 students were reportedly studying there.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief," but the government did not respect this right. In practice the government severely restricted religious freedom, including discouraging organized religious activities except those controlled by officially recognized groups.

"Juche," often translated as extreme self-reliance, and the cult of personality of Kim Jong-il and his late father Kim Il-sung remained important ideological underpinnings of the regime. To assert ideological legitimacy, the government sought to expel external religions, especially Christianity, in the 1960s. Faced with famine and the succession process in the mid-1990s, Kim Jong-il's regime increasingly emphasized a "military-first" policy to replace juche gradually as the effective ruling logic. Indoctrination was intended to ensure loyalty to the system and the leadership, as well as conformity to the state's ideology and authority. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority, who exemplified the state and society's needs, was regarded as opposition to the national interest and sometimes resulted in severe punishment. NGOs reported citizens were exhorted to glorify Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung. Some scholars have said juche and reverence for Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il resembled a form of civil religion. Approximately 100,000 juche research centers reportedly existed throughout the country.

Since the late 1980s, as a 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 others appeared to know little about religious doctrine. According to NGOs these religious organizations have been organized primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organizations and international aid agencies, rather than as instruments to guarantee and support free religious activities. Since 1992 the constitution has authorized religious gatherings and provided for "the right to build buildings for religious use;" however, only officially recognized religious groups enjoy this right. The constitution stipulates that religion "should not be used for purposes of dragging in foreign powers or endangering public security." Ownership of Bibles or other religious materials was reportedly illegal and punishable by imprisonment or execution.

In its 2009 report for the UN Human Rights Council UPR, the government contended that the state was separated from religion and all religions were equal. In addition the government said religious practitioners were free to have a religious life and ceremonies according to their own religious rules at family worship centers and other facilities.

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

The government allowed a number of foreign religious leaders to visit the country.

In June 2010 a South Korean pastor visited North Korea to attend a ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit in 2000.

In January 2010 officials from the Jogye Order--South Korea's largest Buddhist denomination--met with Buddhist leaders in Pyongyang to discuss religious exchange programs between the North and the South; however, in March 2010 the government rejected a request by the Jogye Order to travel to the country and discontinued working-level talks to prepare for a trip by 4,000 Buddhists to a temple near Mount Kumgang.

The number of Buddhist exchanges continued to decline during the reporting period.

In October 2009 a delegation from the World Council of Churches, including the general secretary, Reverend Samuel Kobia, preached at the Bongsu church and visited the adjacent theological seminary. They also visited the Chilgol church and a house church.

In August 2008 and October 2009 Franklin Graham, president of Samaritan's Purse and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, visited the country to meet with high-level government officials, visit relief projects, and preach at the Bongsu Church.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice severely restricted the practice of religion. The 2009 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 consider such sites to be primarily "sightseeing spots for foreigners." KINU concluded that the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated that ordinary citizens do not enjoy religious freedom.

Little is 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 activity 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 only political party in the country). There were unconfirmed reports that nonreligious children of religious believers may be employed in mid-level positions in the government. In the past such individuals suffered broad discrimination with sometimes severe penalties or even imprisonment.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The government deals harshly with all opponents, including those who engage in religious practices it deems 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 150,000 to 200,000 persons were believed to be held in political prison camps in remote areas, some for religious reasons. Prison conditions were harsh, and refugees and defectors who had been in prison stated that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs were generally treated worse than other inmates.

In 2009 Human Rights Watch submitted a report in preparation for the country's UPR which reported that the government had persistently persecuted religiously active persons, typically categorizing them as "hostile elements." In 2009 the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the country noted that, while some religious ceremonies seemed to be allowed, there were indications that practicing religion gave rise to persecution. NGOs, defectors, and refugees have reported the government executed opponents of the regime in recent years.

Executed individuals reportedly included some targeted due to their religious activities such as proselytism and contact with foreigners. Others reportedly were punished for having contact with South Korean humanitarian or religious groups, or missionaries while in China.

Defector reports indicated 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, refugees, defectors, and missionaries indicated that, persons engaged in proselytizing or who had ties to overseas evangelical groups operating across the border in China, have been arrested and subjected to harsh punishment.

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 overthrow of the regime, and alleged that these groups were involved in intelligence gathering. The Korean Workers Party newspaper criticized "imperialists and reactionaries" for trying to use ideological and cultural infiltration, including religion, to destroy socialism from within.

Unverified news reports indicated the government increased the reward for information on any person doing missionary work in the Chinese border region. Former government security agents who defected to South Korea reported intensified police activity aimed at halting religious activity at the border.

Foreign media and a South Korean NGO reported in August 2010 that 23 Christians were arrested in May 2010 for belonging to an underground church in Kuwol-dong, Pyongsong City, South Pyongan Province. Reportedly three were executed, and the others were sent to Yoduk political prison camp.

In June 2009 South Korean activists reported that Ri Hyon Ok was publicly executed for distributing Bibles in the city of Ryongchon near the Chinese border. She allegedly was accused of spying and organizing dissidents. These claims could not be independently verified.

According to an unconfirmed claim from one foreign Christian NGO, nine North Korean nationals in its network disappeared in 2008. The reason for their reported disappearance was unknown.

In 2006 the government reportedly sentenced Son Jong-nam to death for espionage; however NGOs claimed the sentence against Son was based on his contacts with Christian groups in China, his proselytizing activities, and alleged sharing of information with his brother in the ROK. In July 2010 Son's brother reported Son was tortured and died in prison in December 2008. Because the country effectively barred outside observers from investigating such reports, it was not possible to verify this information.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

No information was available on societal attitudes toward religious freedom.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with North Korea 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 and was redesignated on January 16, 2009; as such, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the Secretary designated 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 U.S. government raised religious freedom concerns about the country in multilateral forums and bilaterally with other governments, particularly those that have diplomatic relations with the country. The United States has made clear that addressing human rights would have a significant effect on the prospects for closer U.S.-North Korea ties. State Department officials, including staff from the Office of International Religious Freedom, met regularly with North Korean defectors and with NGOs focused on the country. The U.S. government has granted permission for North Korean government officials to travel to and participate in visits to American faith-based aid organizations that provided humanitarian assistance inside North Korea. Since 2006 the U.S. government has participated in the annual North Korea Freedom Week.

In December 2008 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, cosponsored by the United States, that condemned the country's poor human rights record, expressing "very serious concern" at "continuing reports of systemic, widespread and 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.

The Department of State continued to support programs that documented human rights abuses and increased the availability of outside information within the country. The Department provided support to NGOs that seek to build the capacity of South Korea-based NGOs to improve and expand monitoring and reporting of the human rights situation in the country. Radio Free Asia and Voice of America also provided regular Korean-language broadcasting.

[Back to Top](#)