



## **Korea, Democratic People's Republic of**

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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 period covered by this report, and government policy continued to interfere with the individual's ability to choose and to manifest his or her religious belief. The regime continued to repress the religious activities of unauthorized religious groups. Recent refugee, defector, missionary, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports indicate that religious persons engaging in proselytizing in the country, those who have ties to overseas evangelical Christian groups operating across the border in the People's Republic of China, and specifically those repatriated from China and found to have been in contact with foreigners or missionaries, have been arrested and subjected to harsh penalties. Refugees and defectors continued to allege that they witnessed the arrests and execution of members of underground Christian churches by the regime in prior years. Due to the country's inaccessibility and the inability to gain timely information, the continuation of this activity during the time period covered by this report 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 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 deplorable 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 fully assess human rights conditions or confirm reported abuses. This report is based on information from interviews, press reports, NGO reports, and 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 and NGO representatives working on the Chinese border. Refugee and defector testimony is 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 timeframes wherever possible, and reports are 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 estimated at 22.7 million. The number of religious believers was unknown but was estimated by the Government to be 10,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 4,000 Catholics. Estimates by South Korean and international church-related groups were considerably higher. In addition, the Chondogyo Young Friends Party, a government-approved group based on a traditional religious movement, had approximately 40,000 practitioners, according to the Government. According to a South Korean press report, in 2002 the chairman of the Association of North Korean Catholics stated that the Catholic community in the country had no priests but held weekly prayer services at the Changchung Catholic Church in Pyongyang. However, some doubted that all of those attending services were Catholic.

In Pyongyang there were reportedly four state-controlled Christian churches: two Protestant churches under lay leadership (Bongsu and Chilgol Churches), the Changchung 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 worshiping at these churches is unknown.

The Presbyterian Church of Korea in the South was partnering with the Christian Association in North Korea to rebuild Bongsu Church. In the fall of 2006, according to press reports, a delegation of 90 Christians from South Korea visited the Bongsu church to celebrate completion of its first phase of renovation. According to religious leaders who traveled to the country, there were Protestant pastors at these churches, although it was not known if they were resident or visiting.

In its July 2002 report to the U.N. Human Rights Committee, the country reported the existence of 500 "family worship centers." However, according to the 2007 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) White Paper, defectors interviewed 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. Some NGOs and academics estimate there may be up to several hundred thousand underground Christians in the country. Others question the existence of a large-scale underground church or conclude that no reliable estimate of the number of underground religious believers exists. Individual underground congregations are reportedly very small and confined to private homes. At the same time, some NGOs reported that the individual churches are connected to each other through well-established networks. The regime has not allowed outsiders the access necessary to confirm such claims.

There were an estimated 300 Buddhist temples. Most were regarded as cultural relics, but religious activity was permitted in some. 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 Republic of Korea (ROK) 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 caring for Buddhists living in the area.

The Government announced in June 2007 that 500 monks and Buddhist followers were making day-long pilgrimages to the recently renovated Ryongthong temple in Kaesong strictly for religious purposes. Foreign diplomats in Pyongyang who visited the temple were told that the two monks living there may be joined by more. 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 on August 13, 2006. The church was reportedly commissioned by Kim Jong-il after he visited an Orthodox cathedral in Russia in 2002. Two North Koreans who studied at the Russian Orthodox Seminary in Moscow have been ordained as priests and are serving at the church. The purported aim of the church was primarily to provide pastoral care of Russians in the country, but one religious leader with access to the country speculated that the church likely extended pastoral care to all Orthodox Koreans as well. Similar to other religious groups, no reliable data exists on the number of Orthodox believers.

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 regime, in addition to religious themes. 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 they did not include any children. Other foreigners noted that they were not permitted to have contact with congregants. 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 2007 KINU White Paper, defectors reported being unaware of any recognized religious organizations that maintained branches outside of Pyongyang.

Several schools for religious education exist. There are 3-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 operates the Pyongyang Theological Academy, a graduate institution that trains pastors affiliated with the Korean Christian Federation.

## Section II. Status of 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. Genuine religious freedom does not exist.

The cult of personality of Kim Jong-il and his father remained important ideological underpinnings of the regime, at times seeming to resemble tenets of a state religion. Faced with famine and the succession process in the mid-1990s, Kim Jong-il's regime increasingly emphasized a "military-first" policy to gradually replace *juche* (often translated as extreme self-reliance) as the de facto ruling logic. However, *juche* remained an important ideological concept. 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 that citizens were exhorted to glorify Kim Jong-il.

Since the late 1980s, as a part of the campaign highlighting Kim Il-sung's "benevolent politics," the regime allowed the formation of several government-sponsored religious organizations. Foreigners who met with representatives of these organizations believe that some members are genuinely religious but note that others appear to know little about religious doctrine. According to NGOs, these religious organizations have been organized primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organizations or 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, this right is enjoyed only by officially recognized religious groups. 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 is reportedly illegal and may be punished by imprisonment or execution.

The regime allows overseas faith-based aid organizations to operate inside the country to provide humanitarian assistance. However, such organizations report that they are not allowed to proselytize, their contact with nationals is limited and strictly monitored, and they are accompanied by government escorts at all times.

The regime also allowed a number of high-profile religious leaders to visit the country. In March 2007 Bishop Lazarus You Heung-sik of Daejeon, president of Caritas Korea, led a ten-member team on a visit to the country in the fifth such visit since September 2006. Following the March trip, Caritas reached an agreement with local officials to continue and expand aid for medical and food-producing facilities, according to press reports.

Some South Korean religious groups visited the country to promote reunification. In May 2007 a South Korean interfaith delegation visited Pyongyang, where it met with the Government's Council of Religionists to discuss reunification of the peninsula. Following instructions from the Vatican, the Catholic members of the delegation refrained from celebrating mass to avoid giving the Eucharist to North Koreans posing as Catholics.

### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice severely restricted the practice of religion. The 2007 KINU White Paper indicated that the regime utilizes authorized religious entities for external propaganda and political purposes, and that citizens are 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 indicates 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. Some reports claimed, and circumstantial evidence suggested, that many, if not most of these groups, have been organized by the regime for propaganda and political purposes, including meeting with foreign religious visitors. There have also been reports that funds and goods that are donated to government-approved churches are then channeled through the Korean Workers Party (the only political party in the country). There are 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. Members of underground churches or those connected to border missionary activity were reportedly regarded as subversive elements.

The 2007 KINU White Paper concluded the regime "utilizes religious organizations primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organizations or international aid agencies, rather than instruments to guarantee and support religious activities...North Korea is utilizing religion as a means of gaining foreign currency."

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government deals harshly with all opponents, including those who engage in religious practices deemed unacceptable by the regime. Religious and human rights groups outside of the country provided numerous, usually unconfirmed, reports in previous years that members of underground churches had been beaten, arrested, 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 generally were treated worse than other inmates. A refugee who arrived in South Korea in 2001 claimed that he was tortured for his Christian beliefs after a Bible was discovered among his belongings.

Over the years there have been unconfirmed reports from a few defectors alleging the testing on human subjects of a variety of chemical and biological agents up through the early 1990s. Some accounts have alleged that political or religious detainees were specifically selected for this testing. The Government effectively bars outside observers from investigating such reports.

NGOs, defectors, and refugees have reported that the Government executed opponents of the regime in recent years. Executed individuals reportedly included some targeted for religious activities such as proselytism and contact with foreigners or missionaries while in China.

Defector reports indicated that the regime increased its 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. Reports from NGOs, refugees, defectors, and missionaries indicated that many persons engaging in religious proselytizing, those who had ties to overseas evangelical groups operating across the border in China, and, specifically, those repatriated and found to have contacted foreigners, including Christian missionaries, outside the country have been arrested and subjected to harsh punishment.

During the reporting period, ROK media reports, including testimony from a 2003 defector, indicated that citizens who received help from churches inside China were considered political criminals and received harsher treatment. This included imprisonment, prolonged detention without charge, torture, or execution.

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 official Korean Workers Party newspaper criticized "imperialists and reactionaries" for trying to use ideological and cultural infiltration, including religion, to destroy socialism from within.

According to an unconfirmed claim from one foreign Christian NGO, nine North Korean nationals in its network disappeared during the year. The reason for their reported disappearance was not known.

In March 2006 the Government reportedly sentenced Son Jong-nam to death for espionage. However, NGOs claimed that 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. Son's brother reported that information indicated that Son was alive as of spring 2007. Because the country effectively bars outside observers from investigating such reports, it was not possible to verify the Government's claims about Son Jong-nam's activities or determine whether he had been executed.

The whereabouts of South Korean missionary Kim Dong-shik, who disappeared in 2000 near the country's border with China, remained unknown. North Korean agents allegedly kidnapped him while he was assisting North Korean refugees in China. In May 2007 media reported that Kim's wife believed Kim had most likely died within a year of his disappearance.

NGOs reported as recently as 2001 that the Government conducts "education sessions" to identify Christian leaders so that they can be apprehended in periodic crackdowns.

Unverified news reports in recent years indicated that the Government has increased the reward for information on any person doing missionary work in the Chinese border region.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief or practice; no information was available on societal attitudes toward religious freedom.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government does not have diplomatic relations with the country and has no official presence there but sought to address its religious freedom concerns as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Since 2001 the Secretary of State has designated the country a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The U.S. Government raises 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 dialogue on the country's human rights record would be necessary for the country to join the international community and normalize relations with the United States. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom also has repeatedly raised awareness of the deplorable human rights conditions in the country. State Department officials, including staff from the Office of International Religious Freedom, meet regularly with North Korean defectors and with NGOs focused on the country. In December 2007 the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution, which the United States cosponsored, 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 it further urged the Government to invite U.N. special representatives to visit and to ensure that humanitarian organizations had free access to the country.

The Department of State continued to support programs that document human rights abuses and increase the availability of outside information in the country, and to provide funding to the National Endowment for Democracy to support ROK-based NGOs in their efforts 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.

The country remains subject to the economic restrictions of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment on international trade. Following CPC designation in 2001, these restrictions were also tied to the country's status as a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act.

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