

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2013 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 that it tightly supervised. 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 nongovernment organizations (NGOs) indicated that religious persons who engaged in proselytizing and those who were in contact with foreigners or missionaries were arrested and subjected to extremely harsh penalties, including execution. South Korean media reported that North Koreans were executed for religious activities. Due to the country’s inaccessibility and lack of timely information, arrests and punishments 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 has repeatedly raised its concerns about the state of human rights in the country with bilateral partners and in multilateral forums.

The country does not allow representatives of foreign governments, journalists, or other invited guests the freedom of movement that would enable them to fully assess human rights conditions or confirm reported abuses. While information is becoming more readily available, some reports that rely on defector testimony can be dated because of the time lapse 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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The U.S. government estimates the total population at 24.7 million (July 2013 estimate). In a 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported that there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Roman Catholics in the country. The report noted that the Cheondogyo Young Friends Party, a government-approved group based on a traditional religious movement, had approximately 15,000 practitioners. South Korean and other foreign religious groups estimate that the number of religious practitioners in the country is considerably higher.

In Pyongyang there are four state-controlled Christian churches: two Protestant churches (Bongsu and Chilgol Churches), Changchun Roman Catholic Church, and 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 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for the UN Human Rights Council, 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 basic services at the Changchun Church, but has no ties to the Vatican. There are no Catholic priests residing in the country, but visiting priests occasionally celebrate 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 if they are resident or visiting pastors.

The Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church opened in Pyongyang in 2006. Two DPRK citizens who studied at the Russian Orthodox Seminary in Moscow were ordained as priests and serve at the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country.

In its July 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” According to the 2013 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) White Paper, however, defectors

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are unaware of any such centers. Observers state that “family worship centers” may be part of the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation.

According to the 2013 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report and the 2013 KINU White Paper “A Prison Without Bars,” there continue to be credible reports of private Christian religious activity in the country, although the existence of underground churches and the scope of underground religious activity remain difficult to verify. While some NGOs and academics estimate there may be up to several hundred thousand Christians practicing their faith underground, 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. Some refugee reports confirm that unapproved religious materials are available and secret religious meetings occur, spurred by cross-border contact with individuals and groups in China.

According to the 2013 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 have found these monks to be knowledgeable about Buddhism. Based on defector testimony, the 2013 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 report that Buddhist ceremonies are carried out in various locations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws 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 UPR report, the government contended that the state and religion were separate and that all religions were equal. In addition, the government stated that religious practitioners were free to have a religious life and to perform ceremonies according to their own religious rules at family worship centers and other facilities. Ownership of Bibles or other religious materials, however, is reportedly illegal and punishable by imprisonment or in some cases execution.

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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 has extended to Kim Jong Un. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority, who exemplifies the state and society's needs, is regarded as opposition to the national interest and can result in severe punishment. Some scholars claim that the *juche* philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resemble a form of civil religion. Approximately 100,000 "*juche*" research centers reportedly exist throughout the country.

Government Practices

In practice the government severely restricted religious freedom, including organized religious activities, except those controlled by officially recognized groups.

The government dealt harshly with all opponents, including those who engaged in religious practices it 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 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 reportedly horrific conditions.

In November the South Korean newspaper *Joong Ang Ilbo* reported that 80 individuals were publicly executed for crimes including possessing Bibles, watching foreign television dramas, and prostitution. The mass executions were reportedly carried out on November 3, in seven different cities. According to the report, an eyewitness stated that in Wonsan the authorities gathered 10,000 people in a sports stadium to watch the execution of eight people by firing squad.

In its 2012 report *Songbun: Marked for Life, North Korea's Social Classification System*, the Washington, D.C.-based NGO Committee for Human Rights in North Korea reiterated that all religious individuals were regarded as enemies of the state. The report noted that religion is used as an element of the classification of families within the *songbun*, the socio-political system by which families are classified according to their loyalty to the government. The pervasive *songbun* system determines access to education and health care, employment opportunities, place of residence, and marriage prospects.

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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 among religious personnel both inside the country and with those across the border in China appeared to be increasing.

Government practices severely restricted the practice of religion. The 2013 KINU White Paper indicated the government utilized authorized religious entities for external propaganda and political purposes and reported citizens were strictly barred from entering places of worship. Ordinary citizens considered such places primarily as “sightseeing spots for foreigners.” Foreigners who met with representatives of government-sponsored religious organizations stated they believed that some members were genuinely religious, but noted that others appeared to know little about religious doctrine. KINU concluded that the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated that ordinary citizens did not have religious freedom.

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, but the government reportedly regarded as subversive elements members of underground churches or those connected to missionary activities. There were 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, nonreligious children of believers suffered broad discrimination, with sometimes severe penalties or even imprisonment.

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.”

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.

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 government escorts accompanied them at all times.

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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, 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, but doubted the authenticity of clergy. 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 generally assumed that the government monitored them closely. According to the 2013 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.

The government allowed religious education 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 religious groups mentioned above.

Former government security agents who defected to South Korea reported intensified police action 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.

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.

Some NGOs reported that individual underground churches were connected to each other through well-established networks. The government has not allowed outsiders access to confirm such claims, however.

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

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The South Korean government approved a one-day visit to North Korea by a group of Buddhists of the Jogye Order, the largest Buddhist sect in South Korea. The visit marked the sixth anniversary of a temple’s renovation that was carried out with aid from the South Korean religious order.

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 U.S. Secretary of State first designated the country a CPC in 2001 for particularly severe violations of religious freedom and most recently redesignated it 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 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. U.S. government officials, including representatives from the Office of International Religious Freedom and the special envoy for human rights in North Korea, met with defectors and members of NGOs that are focused on the country.

In March the United States co-sponsored, and the UN Human Rights Council adopted by consensus, a resolution establishing a one-year commission of inquiry (COI) to examine the country’s “grave, widespread, and systematic violations of human rights.” Beginning in August the COI held a series of public hearings in South Korea, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States to gather information from witnesses on human rights violations in the DPRK, including violations of freedom of religion. The country has not cooperated with the COI’s investigation and has not granted the COI access to evaluate human rights conditions on the ground.