



Korea, Republic of

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 38,023 square miles, and its population is approximately forty-eight million. According to a 2005 government survey, when the population stood at 47,041,000, the number of adherents of the predominant religions were: Buddhism, 10,726,000; Protestantism, 8,616,000; Roman Catholicism, 5,146,000; Confucianism, 105 thousand; Won Buddhism, 130 thousand; and other religions, 247 thousand. A total of 22,071,000 citizens did not practice any religion. The percentage of adherents of each faith has remained approximately the same in recent years.

No official figures were available on the membership of other religious groups in the country, which included Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventist Church, Daesun Jinrihoe, and Islam.

Buddhism has approximately twenty-seven orders. The Catholic Church had sixteen dioceses. The Christian Council of Korea reported that there were an estimated fifteen Protestant denominations, including the Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Anglican churches, and the Korean Gospel Church Assembly. Within these Protestant denominations there were approximately 121 Protestant subgroups, an estimated 80 percent of which were Presbyterian subdivisions.

According to Gallup Korea's 2004 survey on the state of religion in the country, 36.0 percent of those who practiced a faith reported that they attended religious services or rituals at a church or temple more than once a week, 10.6 percent attended two to three times per month, 20.6 percent attended once or twice a year, and 4.9 percent did not attend services.

Of those who attended religious services more than once a week, Protestants had the highest attendance rate with 71 percent, Catholics 42.9 percent, and Buddhists 3.5 percent.

Foreign-based missionary groups operated freely. Protestant groups included: Overseas Mission; Overseas Missionary Fellowship; Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth Mission; Global Mission Bible Translator; World Wide Evangelization for Christ; and Serving in Mission for Christ. Catholic groups included: Missionaries of Guadeloupe; Maryknoll Fathers; Little Brothers of Jesus; Claretian Missionaries; Consolate Missionaries; Divine Word Missionaries; and Missionaries of Charity Brothers. In 2005 the country sent more than fourteen thousand missionaries abroad, making it the second largest source of missionaries after the United States.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion, and the Government does not subsidize or favor a particular religion.

There are no government-established requirements for religious recognition. The Traditional Temples Preservation Law protects cultural properties including Buddhist temples, which receive some subsidies from the Government for their preservation and upkeep. Buddha's Birthday and Christmas are the only national holidays that are religious in nature. Recognition of these two days does not negatively impact other religious groups.

The Government does not require or permit religious instruction in public schools. Private schools are free to conduct religious activities.

The Religious Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism takes the lead in organizing groups such as the Korea Religious Council and the Council for Peaceful Religions to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding. The bureau also is responsible for planning regular events such as the Religion and Art Festival, the Seminar for Religious Leaders, and the Symposium for Religious Newspapers and Journalists.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government provides no exemption or alternative civilian service for those who have a religious objection to service in the armed forces. According to the Ministry of National Defense, in 2005 Jehovah's Witnesses accounted for 818 of the 828 men who rejected military service. Of the total, 598 had pending trials. Of the 225 convicted in 2005, 220 were given eighteen to twenty-four month prison sentences. They were allowed to conduct their own religious services in prison. During the period covered by this report, the issue of conscientious objectors continued to be discussed by the public, politicians, Government, and in the courts. The proposed revisions regarding conscientious objectors to the National Military Service Law were pending in the National Assembly's National Defense Committee. In December 2005 the National Human Rights Commission recommended the Government recognize an individual's right, based on religious conviction, to refuse compulsory military service, and called for an alternative form of service. In April 2006 the Ministry of National Defense established a seventeen-member committee, made up of scholars, lawyers, journalists, religious leaders, civic activists, and military officials, to study ways to introduce and to establish the standards for such alternative service.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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 Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. In June 2004 angry citizens demonstrated at the mosque in Seoul for about a month following the beheading of Korean hostage Kim Sun-il in Iraq. The Government provided security and protection to the mosque but did not interfere with the demonstrations, since they were legal assemblies. According to the Institute for Middle East Studies, once the anger over the beheading subsided, Muslims in the country returned to their normal routines and worshipped freely.

Religious leaders regularly met both privately and under government auspices to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. These meetings were given wide and favorable coverage by the media.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials also met regularly with members of various religious communities to discuss issues related to human rights.

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