



Korea, Republic of

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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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 by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

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 a population of 48,846,800. According to a 2005 government survey, when the population stood at 47,041,000, the numbers of adherents of the predominant religions were: Buddhism, 10,726,000; Protestantism, 8,616,000; Roman Catholicism, 5,146,000; Confucianism, 105,000; Won Buddhism, 130,000; and other religions, 247,000. A total of 22,071,000 citizens did not practice any religion. The percentage of the population adhering to each religious tradition has remained approximately the same in recent years.

No official figures were available on the membership of other religious groups, 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 27 orders. The Catholic Church has 16 dioceses. Within the major Protestant traditions there are a total of 121 denominations, approximately 90 percent of which are separate Presbyterian groups. The Christian Council of Korea (CCK) reported that there are an estimated 75 Protestant denominations with at least 100 congregations nationwide, including Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and the Korean Gospel Church Assembly.

According to Gallup Korea's 2004 survey on the state of religion in the country, 36 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 at 71 percent, Catholics 42.9 percent, and Buddhists 3.5 percent.

Foreign-based missionary groups operated freely. In 2006 the country sent more than 16,000 missionaries abroad, making it the world's second largest source of Christian 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 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 Korean 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 National Assembly's Defense Committee, in 2006 Jehovah's Witnesses accounted for all of the 781 men who rejected military service. Of those 781, 548 were given prison sentences of at least 18 months, 1 was given a prison sentence of more than 2 years, 225 are awaiting trial, and 7 were released without charge. Those sentenced were allowed to conduct their own religious services in prison. In 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 17-member committee, made up of scholars, lawyers, journalists, religious leaders, civic activists, and military officials, to study ways to introduce and establish the standards for such alternative service. From April 2006 to March 2007, the committee met 8 times to discuss how to introduce such a system. On June 6, 2007, the committee concluded that it was too early to acknowledge those who have religious objections to service in the military and to introduce an alternative service system.

Other than the contentious objectors mentioned above, 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 Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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. For example, the Korean Council of Religious Leaders holds an annual event, the ROK Religious Culture Festival, which aims to promote reconciliation and mutual understanding among religious groups. The most recent festival was held on October 21, 2006, at Seoul City Hall Plaza and was attended by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, Christian Churches of Korea, Won Buddhism, the Korea Religious Council, and the Catholic Church, among other groups.

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 religious freedom. For example, in July 2007 the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) met with two representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss the problems faced by their followers who reject military service as conscientious objectors. During the meeting the DCM affirmed the U.S. Government's strong support for free expression of religion.

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