



## **Korea, Republic of**

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2008**

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

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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

Religious leaders regularly met both privately and under government auspices to promote mutual understanding and tolerance.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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 49 million. According to 2005 census data, the percentages of adherents to the predominant religious communities are: Buddhist, 22.8 percent; Protestant, 18.3 percent; and Roman Catholic, 10.9 percent.

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

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 more than once a week, Protestants had the highest attendance rate at 71 percent, Catholics 42.9 percent, and Buddhists 3.5 percent.

### **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

#### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion, and the Government does not subsidize or otherwise favor a particular religion. The Constitution requires the separation of church and state.

The Government observes Buddha's Birthday and Christmas as national holidays.

On September 18, 2007, the Government announced the introduction of alternative service for religious or conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors would serve 36 months in national hospitals or recuperation centers, which is 10 to 14 months longer than the required military service. More than 60 percent of Koreans oppose such alternative service, and the legislation had not passed in the National Assembly at the end of the

reporting period. As of May 2008, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, 489 followers were in prison for conscientious objection to military service. More than 60 followers who previously completed compulsory military service were subjected to repeated fines for their refusal to participate in mandatory annual military reserve duty.

The Traditional Temples Preservation Law protects historic cultural properties including Buddhist temples, which receive some subsidies from the Government for their preservation and upkeep.

The Government does not require that religious groups be licensed or registered.

There is no specific licensing or registration requirement for foreign missionaries.

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

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

Other than the conscientious 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 affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

In April 2008 a cosmetics company produced a Nazi-themed television commercial. The company, Coreana, removed the advertisement in response to international complaints. Koreans' general lack of exposure to Judaism (the Jewish community numbers about 100) occasionally leads to insensitive uses of Nazi symbols. A Nazi-themed bar in Seoul is another such example. There is no evidence to suggest that government or non-government entities discriminate against Jewish people or Israeli citizens.

In October 2005, a student at a religious private high school filed a lawsuit against the school for expelling him for his protest against mandatory religion class. The Seoul High Court ruled in favor of the school, reversing the decision of a lower court. The student filed an appeal to the Supreme Court, and the ruling is pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

Religious leaders regularly met both privately and under government auspices to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. The media gave public meetings wide and favorable coverage. For example, the Korean Council of Religious Leaders holds an annual event, the Republic of Korea Religious Culture Festival, which aims to promote reconciliation and mutual understanding among religious groups. The most recent festival, which was held on October 20, 2007, in Seoul, was attended by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, Christian Churches of Korea, Won Buddhism, the Korea Religious Council, and the Catholic Church, among others.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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. In July 2007 U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss the imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service.

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