



## Korea, Republic of

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 reporting period.

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.

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 the most recent census data (2005), 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 at 42.9 percent, and Buddhists at 3.5 percent.

#### Section II. Status of Government Respect for 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.

The law requires military service for all Korean national males--24 months in the army, 26 months in the navy, and 27 months for the air force. The law does not protect conscientious objectors, who can receive a maximum 3-year prison sentence. Watchtower International, a Jehovah's Witnesses organization, reported that as of April 1, 2009, there were 465 Jehovah's Witnesses and a handful of others serving an average of 14 months in prison for conscientious objection to military service. An additional 99 Jehovah's Witnesses were in various stages of litigation and are not in detention.

During the reporting period, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) reversed its earlier position and announced it would not pursue the introduction of an alternative service for conscientious objectors. The Ministry cited lack of public support as the primary reason for its decision; an MND-sponsored poll found that 68.1 percent of respondents opposed instituting alternative service, but an independent poll taken at approximately the same time found that only 38.7 percent were opposed with just less than half of respondents in favor. Meanwhile, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the courts were increasingly sympathetic to the plight of conscientious objectors. In September 2008 a district court asked that the Constitutional Court decide the constitutionality of the conscription law. This case was still pending at the end of the reporting period, but the Constitutional Court ruled in 2002 and 2004 that the law was constitutional.

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 reporting period.

In August 2008 tens of thousands of Buddhists protested alleged discrimination by the Government. Buddhist leaders denounced a police search of a temple vehicle for fugitive anti-Lee Myung-bak demonstrators and demanded the dismissal of the Korean National Police Agency commissioner general, who had appeared in a poster promoting a Christian police event. In September President Lee Myung-bak expressed regret that any actions of civil servants had "caused concern within the Buddhist community." The head of the Buddhist Jogye Order accepted an apology from the police commissioner general in November.

#### 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. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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.

Prominent 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.

#### 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. During the reporting period embassy officials met several times with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss the imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service. Embassy officials also engaged the MND on this issue.