

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK)

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 which were tightly supervised by the government. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. Genuine religious freedom does not exist. Government policy 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 recent refugees, defectors, missionaries, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) indicated that religious persons who engaged in proselytizing in the country and those who were in contact with foreigners or missionaries were arrested and subjected to harsh penalties. Refugees and defectors stated that they witnessed or heard of arrests and possible executions of underground Christian church members in prior years. Due to the country’s inaccessibility and the inability of foreigners to gain timely information, the continuation of arrests and executions during the year 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. It was redesignated a CPC August 18. The U.S. government raised its concerns about the state of human rights in the country with bilateral partners and in multilateral forums. The government does not allow representatives of foreign governments, journalists, or other invited guests freedom of movement that would enable them fully to assess human rights conditions or confirm reported abuses.

This report is based on information from interviews, press reports, South Korean government reports, reports by think tanks and NGOs, as well as missionary, refugee, and defector testimonies obtained over the past decade, supplemented

where possible by information drawn from more recent reports from visitors to the country. Information submitted as part of the country's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations Human Rights Council was also used. Refugee and defector testimonies were often outdated because of the time lapse between departures from the country and contact with organizations able to document human rights conditions. This report cites specific sources and time frames wherever possible, and reports were corroborated to the extent possible. While limited in detail, the information in this report is indicative of the situation with regard to religious freedom in the country in recent years.

Section I. Religious Demography

In a 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Commission, the government reported that there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Roman Catholics in the country. The report also 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 there are a considerably higher number of religious practitioners in the country.

In Pyongyang there are four state-controlled Christian churches: two Protestant churches (Bongsu and Chilgol Churches), the Changchun Roman Catholic Church, and the 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 UPR, 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 for basic services at the Changchun Church but has no ties with the Vatican. There are no Catholic priests residing in the country, but visiting priests occasionally provide Mass at the Changchun Church in Pyongyang.

According to religious leaders who have traveled to the country, there were Protestant pastors at the Bongsu and Chilgol Churches, although it was not known

if they were resident or visiting pastors. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has reportedly contributed to humanitarian projects administered by the Bongsu Church.

In its July 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” However, according to the 2010 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) White Paper, defectors interviewed were unaware of any such centers. Observers stated that “family worship centers” may be part of the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation, while an unknown number of “underground churches” operated apart from the federation and are not recognized by the government. The 2010 KINU White Paper and the 2007 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report, “A Prison Without Bars,” included defector testimonies referencing the existence of underground churches but concluded that their existence was hard to verify.

In July 2009 the Dong-A Ilbo newspaper reported an estimated 30,000 Christians, while some NGOs and academics estimated there may be up to several hundred thousand Christians practicing their faith underground in the country. Others questioned the existence of a large-scale underground church or concluded that it was impossible to estimate accurately the number of underground religious believers. Individual underground congregations were reportedly very small and typically confined to private homes. However, the 2010 KINU White Paper reported that none of the defectors interviewed were aware of family churches. At the same time, some NGOs reported individual churches were connected to each other through well-established networks. The government has not allowed outsiders access to confirm such claims.

According to the 2010 KINU White Paper, there were an estimated 60 Buddhist temples. Most were regarded as cultural relics, but religious activity was permitted in some. Monks served as caretakers in many of these temples and foreign visitors have found these monks to be knowledgeable about Buddhism. 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.” In 2007, the South Korean government and foreign tourists funded the reconstruction of the Shingye or Singyesa (Holy Valley) Temple which was destroyed during the Korean War. A South Korean monk, the first to permanently reside in the country, has lived at the temple since 2004 but serves primarily as a guide for visiting tourists rather than as a ministering pastor for local Buddhists. Based on defector testimony, the 2010 KINU White Paper reported that most residents of the country had not heard about Buddhist scriptures and had never seen a Buddhist monk.

State-controlled press reported on several occasions that Buddhist ceremonies had been carried out in various locations.

The Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church opened in Pyongyang in 2006. Then-Chairman Kim Jong-il reportedly commissioned the church after he visited an Orthodox cathedral in Russia in 2002. Two citizens who studied at the Russian Orthodox Seminary in Moscow were ordained as priests and are serving at the church. The purported aim of the church was primarily to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country, but one religious leader with access to the country speculated that the church likely extended pastoral care to Orthodox Koreans as well.

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. Foreign legislators attending 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 it was generally assumed that they were monitored closely. According to the 2010 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.

Several religious education schools exist in the country. There were three-year colleges for training Protestant and Buddhist clergy. A religious studies program was established at Kim Il-sung University in 1989; its graduates usually worked in the foreign trade sector. In 2000, a Protestant seminary was reopened with assistance from foreign missionary groups. Critics, including at least one foreign sponsor, charged that the government opened the seminary only to facilitate reception of assistance funds from foreign faith-based NGOs. The Chosun Christian Federation, a religious group believed to be controlled by the government, contributed to the curriculum used by the seminary. The Chosun Christian League operated the Pyongyang Theological Academy, a graduate institution that trained pastors affiliated with the Korean Christian Federation. The

Bongsu Church reportedly runs a theological seminary. In October 2009, 12 students reportedly studied there.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom.

In its 2009 report for the UN Human Rights Council UPR, 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.

“Juche,” or self-reliance, remained as the cult of personality of Kim Jong-il and his late father Kim Il-sung and an important ideological underpinning of the government. To assert ideological legitimacy, in the 1960s the government sought to expel external religions, especially Christianity. Faced with famine and the succession process in the mid-1990s, Kim Jong-il’s government increasingly emphasized a “military-first” policy as the effective ruling logic. Indoctrination was intended to ensure loyalty to the system and the leadership, as well as conformity to the state’s ideology and authority. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority, who exemplified the state and society’s needs, was regarded as opposition to the national interest and sometimes resulted in severe punishment. Some scholars claim that the “Juche” philosophy and reverence for Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il resembled a form of civil religion. Approximately 100,000 “Juche” research centers reportedly exist throughout the country.

The government does not observe any religious holidays as national holidays.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees. In practice the government severely restricted religious freedom, including discouraging organized religious activities, except those controlled by officially recognized groups.

The government deals harshly with all opponents, including those who engage in religious practices it deems 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 150,000 to 200,000 persons were believed to be held in political prison camps in remote areas, some for religious reasons. Prison conditions were harsh, and refugees and defectors who had been in prison stated that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs were generally treated worse than other inmates.

During the year, a defector reported that Myong-il Park, who had obtained a Bible during a visit to China, was arrested by the State Security Agency in 2000 and has been imprisoned in a political prison camp since then.

Foreign media and a South Korean NGO reported that 23 Christians were arrested in May 2010 for belonging to an underground church in Kuwol-dong, Pyongsong City, South Pyongan Province. Reportedly, three were executed and the others were sent to the political prison camp in Yodok.

In June 2009 South Korean activists reported that Ri Hyon Ok was publicly executed for distributing Bibles in the city of Ryongchon near the Chinese border. She allegedly was accused of spying and organizing dissidents. These claims could not be independently verified.

In 2009 the NGO Human Rights Watch submitted a report in preparation for the country's UPR which reported that the government had persistently persecuted religiously active persons, typically categorizing them as "hostile elements." In 2009 the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in North Korea noted that, while some religious ceremonies seemed to be allowed, there were indications that practicing religion gave rise to persecution.

In 2006 the government reportedly sentenced Son Jong-nam to death for espionage. However, NGOs claim the sentence against Son was based on his contacts with Christian groups in China, his proselytizing activities, and alleged sharing of information with his brother in South Korea. In July 2010 Son's brother reported that after being tortured Son died in prison in December 2008. Because the country effectively barred outside observers from investigating such reports, it was not possible to verify this information.

NGOs, defectors, and refugees have reported that the government executed some of its opponents in recent years. Among those executed were individuals who engaged in religious activities such as proselytism and having contact with foreign missionaries or other foreign religious individuals. Others reportedly were punished for having contact with South Korean humanitarian or religious groups or missionaries in China.

The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), an NGO based in Seoul, Republic of Korea, maintains a database on human rights violations in the country based primarily on defector testimonies. Its database at the end of the year recorded 1,014 known cases related to restriction on religious practice. Of these cases, 466 were due to religious activities, 205 to the possession of religious items, 84 to religious propagation, 71 to contact with religious people, and 188 to other reasons.

Defector reports indicated that 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 with religious personnel both inside the country and across the border in China appeared to be increasing. However, there was not enough data to determine the size and scope of religious activity. Reports from NGOs, refugees, defectors, and missionaries indicated that persons engaged in proselytizing or who had ties to overseas evangelical groups operating across the border in China have been arrested and subjected to harsh punishment.

Government policy and practice severely restricted the practice of religion. The 2010 KINU White Paper indicated the government utilized authorized religious entities for external propaganda and political purposes, and citizens were strictly barred from entering places of worship. Ordinary citizens consider such sites primarily as "sightseeing spots for foreigners." KINU concluded that the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated that ordinary citizens do not enjoy religious freedom.

Little is 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, while members of underground churches or those connected to missionary activities were reportedly regarded as subversive elements. Some reports claimed, and circumstantial evidence suggested, that many if not most of the government-controlled religious organizations were created for propaganda and political purposes, including meeting with foreign religious visitors. There were

also 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, such individuals suffered broad discrimination with sometimes severe penalties or even imprisonment.

Since the late 1980s, as part of the campaign highlighting Kim Il-sung's "benevolent politics," the government allowed the formation of several government-sponsored religious organizations. Foreigners who met with representatives of these organizations believed that some members were genuinely religious but noted that others appeared to know little about religious doctrine. According to NGOs, these religious organizations have been organized primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organizations and international aid agencies rather than as instruments to guarantee and support free religious activities. Since 1992 the constitution has authorized religious gatherings and provided for "the right to build buildings for religious use." However, only officially recognized religious groups enjoy this right. The constitution stipulates that religion "should not be used for purposes of dragging in foreign powers or endangering public security." Ownership of Bibles or other religious materials was reportedly illegal and punishable by imprisonment or in some cases execution.

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 Korean Workers Party newspaper criticized "imperialists and reactionaries" for trying to use ideological and cultural infiltration, including religion, to destroy socialism from within.

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. During the reporting period, several faith-based NGOs were allowed to visit the country to provide humanitarian assistance.

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

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 country was first designated a CPC in 2001 for particularly severe violations of religious freedom and most recently redesignated by the secretary of state August 18. 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 fora and bilaterally with other governments, particularly those which have diplomatic relations with the country. The United States has made clear that addressing human rights, including religious freedom, would have a significant effect on improving the 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 North Korean Human Rights Issues, have met with defectors and members of NGOs that are focused on the country.

In December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, cosponsored by the United States, condemning the country's poor human rights record and expressing "very serious concern" at "the persistence of reports of systemic, widespread, and grave violations of human rights." The resolution called on the country to fulfill its obligations under human rights instruments to which it was a party, and urged the government to invite UN special representatives to visit and ensure that humanitarian organizations had free access to the country. In March, the UN Human Rights Council approved a resolution, cosponsored by the United States, deploring the lack of human rights in the country and extending the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the country.