

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in North Korea—officially known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)—remained among the worst in the world. North Korea’s ruling ideology, known as *Juche*, deifies North Korean leaders and justifies their rule. It forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat. Rooted in *Juche*, the [Ten Principles](#) for Establishing a Korean Workers’ Party Transcendental Guidance System require unconditional loyalty and obedience to the North Korean leader. They also effectively override the rights and freedoms enshrined in international and North Korean law, including the North Korean [constitution](#), which nominally grants freedom of religion. Internal Party legal commentaries, published in 2018, which constitute authoritative guidance for interpreting North Korean constitutional and criminal law within the framework of the Ten Principles and *Juche*, contain explicit antireligion language.

The North Korean government attempts to provide an illusion of religious freedom to the outside world through state-backed religious organizations and sites such as the Korean Christian Federation, Korean Buddhist Federation, Changchung Cathedral, and Kwangbop Temple. In practice, authorities target and persecute various religious groups and adherents, including Protestants, Buddhists, adherents of shamanism or traditional Korean folk religion, Chondoists, and others. The [songbun system](#) classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state; religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class and are considered enemies of the state, deserving “discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution.”

According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Korean Future Initiative’s (KFI) 2020 [report](#) on religious freedom violations in North Korea, authorities persecuted religious believers on a variety of charges, including religious practice, religious activities in China, possessing religious items such as Bibles, contact with religious persons, attending religious services, and sharing religious beliefs. Religious adherents suffered a range of official violations

and mistreatments, including arbitrary surveillance, interrogation, arrest, detention, and imprisonment; punishment of family members; torture; sexual violence; forced labor; and execution. The report also provides details on North Korean government agencies that have been directly involved in carrying out egregious persecution of religious believers, including the Ministry of State Security (MSS), which operates internment camps, holding centers, political prison camps, and pretrial detention centers; the Ministry of People’s Security (MPS), which operates labor camps, holding centers, pretrial detention centers, long-term reeducation camps, and precinct offices; and the Border Security Command, which plays “a significant role in religious freedom violations alongside the MSS and MPS.”

Consistent with past USCIRF reporting, KFI findings indicate that Protestant Christians are especially vulnerable to persecution, followed by adherents of shamanism. The NGO Open Doors has long [ranked](#) North Korea as the country where Christians face the “most extreme” persecution, most recently in January 2021. Open Doors estimates that of around 400,000 Christians in North Korea, approximately 50,000 to 70,000 are currently imprisoned. Most North Korean Christians are unable to meet for collective worship due to severe repression, and they suffer from harsh abuses such as long-term imprisonment in various prisons or prison-like facilities, severe beatings that result in broken bones and ruptured skin, strangulation, starvation, sexual violence, forced abortion, and execution. The MSS is believed to be principally responsible for persecution against Christians.

The practice of shamanism is pervasive in North Korean society, but its practitioners face severe persecution. As North Korean authorities define shamanism as a “crime of superstition,” practitioners have been subjected to detention, arrest, physical assault, and execution. The MPS is believed to be primarily responsible for abuses against adherents of shamanism. Information on the condition of adherents of other major religious traditions—such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondoism—in North Korea remains very limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Fill and maintain the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues as a fulltime, independent position at the U.S. Department of State, and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Urge the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country; and
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in U.S. policy toward North Korea, including considering the lifting of certain sanctions in return for concrete progress in religious freedom and related human rights.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Work with the administration to clarify the conditions under which Congress would approve the partial or complete lifting of certain sanctions under the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 in return for significant progress on denuclearization and commitments to improve religious freedom conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Can Human Rights Advocacy Resolve the North Korea Nuclear Impasse?](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [There Shall Be No God But Kim Jong Un](#) (in *The National Interest*)

Background

Information about religious demographics and religious freedom conditions in North Korea is difficult to confirm and often outdated. North Koreans traditionally followed Buddhism and an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way). The country had a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War (1950–1953), with Pyongyang known as the “Jerusalem of the East,” but successive crackdowns have shrunk the Christian population to an estimated [2 percent](#) of the total population. Many North Koreans learn about the religion when they flee to South Korea via China. Although technically illegal, shamanism and traditional folk religion practices, such as fortunetelling, are widespread.

Defectors and Refugees

Defectors and refugees from North Korea are primary sources of information about religious freedom conditions in the country. In recent years, however, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea has decreased. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a further decrease in 2020. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, about 230 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea during the year—the lowest number in 20 years and significantly less than the 2019 figure of 1,047.

The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and repatriates them if discovered, without regard to their risk of persecution on return. This practice stands in direct violation of China’s obligations under the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In addition, since 2017, Chinese authorities have expelled hundreds of South Korean missionaries, many of whom played an instrumental role in helping North Korean refugees escape.

In December 2020, South Korea’s National Assembly passed a controversial [law](#) criminalizing activities that send anti-North Korea materials—including religious ones such as leaflets, Bibles, and cultural items—into North Korea by balloons. Many activists who send these materials across the border are North Korean defectors and Christian missionaries. The law has drawn criticism from [human rights organizations](#) and [U.S. politicians](#), who have expressed concerns over the law’s impact on freedoms of expression and religion.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Given the country’s [closed](#) and isolated nature, information about specific religious and political prisoners of conscience is difficult to obtain. NGOs and rescue groups that work on North Korean human rights and refugee issues often conceal identities of North Korean individuals in order to protect them and their families from government persecution and retaliation. USCIRF continues to [advocate](#) for the release of Deacon Jang Moon Seok—also known by his Chinese name, [Zhang Wen Shi](#)—whom USCIRF adopted as a religious prisoner of conscience (RPOC). Zhang is a Chinese citizen of Korean

descent. Prior to his abduction from China by North Korean agents in November 2014, Zhang provided assistance to—and shared his Christian faith with—North Koreans in China. North Korean authorities sentenced Zhang to 15 years in prison.

United Nations Activity

In June 2020, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a [resolution](#) condemning “in the strongest terms the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations and other human rights abuses” committed by North Korea. The resolution expressed particular concerns over North Korea’s persecution of individuals and groups on religious and other grounds; “denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to adopt a religion or belief”; and discrimination based on the *songbun* system, which includes consideration of religion. The UNHRC also called on the North Korean government to ensure the right to freedom of religion or belief. As a member of the UNHRC, South Korea [supported](#) the passage of the resolution but did not cosponsor the draft resolution.

On December 16, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) condemning the “grave human rights situation” and “the lack of accountability for human rights violations” in North Korea. The General Assembly expressed specific concerns over North Korea’s imposition of the death penalty and execution of individuals on account of religion or belief; the pervasive and severe restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief; and the government’s discrimination against people based on the *songbun* system that includes consideration of religion. South Korea did not [cosponsor](#) this resolution.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, relations between the United States and North Korea deteriorated due to a lack of progress on security-related negotiations. The three historic summits that were held between then President Donald J. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 and 2019 did not lead to substantive progress toward full denuclearization. Neither human rights more broadly nor religious freedom specifically were included as an integral part of those bilateral negotiations.

In December, seven of the 15 members of the UN Security Council—the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, the Dominican Republic, and Estonia—[requested](#) a public briefing on human rights abuses in North Korea. After China and Russia [objected](#) to the request, the seven countries brought up the issue at a closed-door meeting on December 11, expressing concerns that North Korea’s “human rights violations pose an imminent threat to international peace and security.” Also in December, the State Department [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing restrictions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974.