

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in North Korea remained among the worst in the world. North Korea's ruling ideology, known as *Juche*, forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat. Rooted in *Juche*, the *Ten Principles* for Establishing a Monolithic Leadership System require absolute and unconditional loyalty and obedience to the teachings of the North Korean leader. The Ten Principles effectively override the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law and the North Korean *constitution*, which nominally grants religious freedom. The ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) actively enforces the Ten Principles at all levels of government and across society, monitors and controls religious belief and activities, and systematically denies North Korean citizens the right to religious freedom.

North Korea's *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." The government attempts to *provide* an illusion of religious freedom to the outside world through state-backed religious organizations and sites such as the Jangchung Cathedral. In reality, religious freedom remains nonexistent in North Korea as authorities actively and systematically target and persecute religious groups and adherents, including Christians, shamanic adherents, Buddhists, and Chondoists.

According to Korea Future's 2021 *report* on religious freedom violations in North Korea, authorities persecuted religious adherents for their religious practice, religious activities in China, possession of religious items, contact with religious persons, and sharing of religious beliefs. Religious adherents suffered a range of official violations and mistreatments, including arbitrary deprivation of liberty, torture, sexual violence, forced labor, and execution. Under WPK command, myriad central and local party and government organizations are directly *involved* in carrying out these egregious abuses.

Protestant Christians remain especially vulnerable to persecution. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Open Doors has long *ranked* North Korea as the country where Christians face the "most extreme" persecution. Most North Korean Christians are unable to meet for collective worship due to pervasive surveillance and severe repression. Owning religious materials such as Bibles is considered extremely risky and life threatening, if discovered. Christians who are caught practicing their faith face harsh abuses such as long-term imprisonment in various prisons or prison-like facilities, torture, forced labor, sexual violence, and summary execution. Korea Future *characterizes* the state's persecution of Christians as "systematic" in nature and "purposely directed at the destruction of Christian communities." The United Kingdom's All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea *concluded* in its 2021 report that the atrocities against Christians in the country could amount to genocide. Based on credible evidence, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) is believed to be principally responsible for persecution against Christians. In addition, the Border Security Command works closely with the MSS and Chinese authorities to detain, identify, and repatriate North Korean Christians who are caught possessing Bibles or engaging in religious activities in China.

The practice of shamanism—which authorities define as a crime of "superstition"—is pervasive in North Korean society. Persecution of shamanic adherents has escalated in recent years after the WPK *issued* directives to "eradicate superstitious activities." Some shamanic adherents reportedly received sentences of life in prison or death. The Ministry of People's Security (MPS) is believed to be primarily responsible for abuses against shamanic adherents, though more recent reporting suggests that the MSS is becoming more involved in their persecution. 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 violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in broader U.S. policy toward—and in bilateral negotiations with—North Korea;
- Fill and maintain the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights

Issues at the U.S. Department of State to promote and integrate religious freedom and human rights in U.S. policy toward North Korea, including by coordinating multilateral efforts in international fora, such as in the United Nations, and with the European Union and other like-minded countries; and

- Impose targeted and broad sanctions—including coordinated, multilateral sanctions with international partners—as

appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea, and consider lifting certain sanctions in return for concrete progress in religious freedom and related human rights.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act and urge the Biden administration to appoint the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Organized Persecution: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea](#)

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. Shamanism and traditional folk religion practices, such as fortunetelling, are widespread.

North Korean 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 significantly due to tightened security along borders between China and North Korea as well as between China and Southeast Asian countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a further decrease. In 2021, the Chinese government reportedly [detained](#) at least 1,170 North Korean refugees in China due to pandemic-related border closures, but it began to repatriate them to North Korea after the China-North Korea border reopened in July. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, only 63 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea in 2021, the lowest number in 20 years. 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, which is a violation of its international obligations.

North Korean Christians who have contact with Christian missionaries and NGO workers in China face severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea. Since 2017, Chinese authorities have expelled hundreds of South Korean missionaries, many of whom played an instrumental role in helping North Korean refugees escape. The situation of Deacon [Zhang Wen Shi](#)—whom USCIRF adopted as a Religious Prisoner of Conscience—remains unknown. North Korean authorities reportedly abducted Zhang in November 2014 and subsequently sentenced him to 15 years in prison in connection to his work assisting North Koreans in China.

United Nations Activity

In January 2021, the Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights [issued](#) a report to promote accountability for human rights violations in North Korea. It found that the North Korean government committed crimes against humanity targeting “people considered a threat to the country’s political system and leadership, including people who [practice] religion,” and these atrocities may be ongoing.

In March 2021, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a [resolution](#) condemning “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations and other human rights abuses committed” by North Korea. It expressed grave concerns over North Korea’s persecution of individuals 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, including consideration of religion. The UNHRC also called on the North Korean government to ensure the right to freedom of religion or belief. The United States [cosponsored](#) the resolution, but South Korea did not.

In December, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [delivered](#) a joint statement to the UN Security Council on behalf of eight nations condemning North Korea’s human rights violations and abuses that include religious persecution. The joint statement also called on UN Security Council members to support an open briefing next year to discuss the dire human rights situation in North Korea and its implications for peace and security. That same month, the UN General Assembly [passed](#) a resolution—sponsored by more than 60 countries—condemning North Korea’s human rights violations. The resolution called for swift investigations into these violations, which may amount to crimes against humanity, and a referral to the International Criminal Court. South Korea did not [cosponsor](#) this resolution for the third year in a row.

Key U.S. Policy

There has been little progress in U.S.-North Korea relations in 2021. In April, the Biden administration indicated that it [completed](#) its North Korea Policy Review, the content of which likely will [remain](#) classified. The Biden administration stated its intention to [take](#) a “calibrated and practical approach” toward North Korea and its willingness to engage without preconditions. The administration has repeatedly [reached out](#) to the North Korean government for dialogue, but as of December 2021 it had not received a positive response. During South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s visit with President Joseph R. Biden in May, the two leaders [issued](#) a joint statement that affirmed a mutual commitment to promote human rights—including efforts to improve the human rights situation in North Korea—and to expand cooperation to ensure the freedom of religion and belief.

On November 15, the State Department [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action existing, ongoing restrictions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974. In December, pursuant to Executive Order 13687, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) North Korea’s Central Public Prosecutors Office and senior official Ri Yong Gil for human rights violations. In March, 11 members of Congress [sent](#) a bipartisan letter urging the Biden administration to appoint the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues and promote human rights in North Korea.