

Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

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Via Zoom

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Abstract: This testimony will address religious oppression in North Korea, which USCIRF classifies as a “country of particular concern” (CPC). North Korea has persecuted Christianity and other religions with extreme prejudice, although the capital city of Pyongyang was once known as the “Jerusalem of the East.” The witness will highlight the importance of a “human rights upfront approach” and reenergized information campaigns to empower the people of North Korea through information from the outside world, in order to promote human rights, in particular religious freedom. The testimony calls for a transformation of the UN ECOSOC NGO Committee, in order to open access to genuine pro-religious freedom, pro-human rights organizations, and enhance their influence at UN fora.

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. North Korea policy has been rightfully focused on doing away with the production and proliferation of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. However, according to the February 2014 report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the DPRK and to countless reports by human rights CSOs, the Kim family regime has been committing crimes against humanity, often involving persecution of people of faith, primarily Christians. There is a need to elevate North Korean human rights, in particular freedom of religion, to bring the issue on par with the other critical issues, including the political, security, and military conundrum surrounding North Korea.

Religious Oppression in North Korea

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has designated North Korea as a "country of particular concern" (CPC). The United States continues to stand for both national security and values we share with trusted friends, partners, and allies such as South Korea. South Korea is home to Asia’s second largest percentage of Christians, second only to the Philippines. South Korea’s most prevalent religion is Christianity (19.7 percent Protestant, 7.9 percent Catholic). Respect for human rights, in particular respect for religious freedom, lies at the very heart of the fundamental values we share with our South Korean friends. And faith can provide an avenue of communication with our South Korean allies.

In North Korea, the Kim regime has continued to oppress human rights, in particular religious freedom, for nearly eight decades. A quarter century after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the Kim regime has not only managed to survive, but also to accomplish two hereditary transmissions of power, from grandfather Kim Il-sung to son Kim Jong-il in July 1994, and from

son Kim Jong-il to grandson Kim Jong-un in December 2011. One possible explanation for the longevity of the Kim regime is that it is the result of the fusion of four totalitarian political systems. All North Koreans have known for the past six centuries has been totalitarianism: five hundred years of the feudal Chosun dynasty; forty years of Japanese imperial occupation from 1905 to 1945; Stalinist communism; and the Kim family regime's kleptocratic tyranny.

As the tragedy of Korean separation continues, one remembers that the northern half of the Korean peninsula was once the cradle of the Korean Presbyterian Church. Prior to the communist takeover, the capital city of Pyongyang used to be known as the "Jerusalem of the East." However, in 1946, the North Korean People's Committee forced the closure of churches with congregations that did not meet a certain predetermined number of attendees. The Committee began to forbid Protestant and Catholic in-house assemblies and made Sunday a workday and Monday a rest day. Under the pretext that the sound of religious songs disturbed public life, the same Committee asked churches to relocate. Communist party agitators were inserted into Christian communities and church assemblies. They began criticizing the sermons as being "unprogressive."

In North Korea, religious freedom went from restriction to suppression to violent obliteration. In a 1962 speech before the People's Safety Agency, the North Korean secret political police, Kim Il-sung said:

"We cannot move towards a communist society with religious people. That is why we had to put on trial and punish those who hold positions of deacons or higher in Protestant or Catholic churches. Other undesirables among the religious people were also put on trial. Believers were given the choice to give up religion so they can get away with labor work. Those who did not were sent to prison camps."

Soon after the establishment of the DPRK in 1948, according to the 1950 North Korean statistical yearbook, 22.2 percent of North Koreans were religious. In the second national human rights report submitted by the North Korean delegation to the UN Human Rights Council for review in July 2001, the delegation said that there was a total of about 38,000 religious believers in North Korea, including 10,000 Protestants, 3,000 Catholics, 10,000 Buddhists, and 15,000 Chondoists, a total of 0.2 percent of the population. It is estimated that there are about five Russian Orthodox churches as well. The cataclysmic drop from 22.2 to 0.2 percent happened swiftly. Over just a few years, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, North Korean Christians were imprisoned, executed, driven into exile, and Christianity almost went extinct. Violent repression of suspected underground Christians continues today. Even 0.2 percent official Christians is likely doctored data. In truth, Christianity has only survived underground, despite grave danger. The Kim regime tries to appear before the international community as tolerating religion and guaranteeing religious freedom, while in reality it suppresses religion internally. Through this duplicitous policy, the Kim regime aims to deflect international criticism and seek economic aid.

Such aid comes in particular from well-meaning Christian groups that often fail to understand the true nature of the Kim regime and its policy of human rights denial.

Freedom of religion does not exist in North Korea, although Article 68 of the DPRK Constitution allows it on paper. The people of North Korea are not allowed the opportunity to read their own constitution. They do not have access to international human rights treaties that protect freedom of religion, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which North Korea acceded to in 1981.

Like other communist leaders before him, Kim Il-sung rejected religion as “the opium of the people.” Religious persecution was a common thread in the atheist ideology of Feuerbach, Marx, Engels, and in the policies of Lenin and Mao. But it is the Kim family regime that has taken religious persecution to a level practically unprecedented in the modern world.

In deceitful displays of “Potemkinism,” foreign visitors and residents of North Korea will be taken to so-called “Protestant” churches whose doors are chained on Easter Sunday and so-called “Catholic” Mass devoid of Holy Communion, holy water, or Catholic prayer. Regime agents will masquerade as ministers, priests, and parishioners, saying so-called “prayers” for Kim Jong-un and his regime and blasting American “imperialism.”

In North Korea, anyone suspected of being a Christian, of having a Christian family member, of associating with Christians, or having been exposed to the Christian faith is harshly punished. When North Korean escapees are arrested in China and forcibly repatriated to North Korea, in direct violation of China’s obligations under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, they are aggressively interrogated, beaten, and tortured. North Korea’s Ministry of State Security and Ministry of Social Security ask them two questions: “Did you come across any Christian missionaries while outside the country? Did you come across any South Koreans along the road of defection?”

Why does the Kim regime fear and resent Christianity so much? The answer lies in the nature of the regime. Kim Jong-un sits at the top of a post-communist, post-industrial, kleptocratic dynasty. The Kim family regime is a criminal organization masquerading as a sovereign state. This is a regime that holds absolute monopoly on political power through oppression unparalleled in the contemporary world: indoctrination, information control, a policy of human rights denial, and prioritizing its apocalyptic weapons programs over the human rights, welfare and human security of its citizens.

Any religious belief and Christianity in particular as well as free, democratic, prosperous South Korea constitute the only challenges to the Kim regime’s absolute monopoly on power. Christianity offers an alternative way of life that delegitimizes tyranny and transcends oppression. Despite mortal danger and overwhelming coercion, control, surveillance, and punishment, underground churches have been growing in North Korea, with the help of outside missionaries and churches. The underground church provides a venue for the free exchange of

ideas. Its members desperately endeavor to escape the overwhelming control of North Korea's three internal security agencies, their 270,000 agents, and their omnipresent informer networks. Underground North Korean Christians are now in the range of tens, if not hundreds of thousands. This is a small number for a population of 25 million, but Christianity and other religions are still surviving tyranny.

Public discourse and advocacy on North Korea have been focusing on markets and information. And those are true agents of transformation, slowly but surely eroding the regime's grip on power. Yet, there is one more agent of change, and that is the growing underground church of North Korea. Under the tyranny of the Kim Jong-un regime, there is no civil society, and no hope for a nascent civil society, in the absence of dramatic change. Underground Christian churches provide the only hope for the advent of civil society in North Korea, perhaps playing a similar role to that of Solidarność in Poland in the 1980s. Sending in information from the outside world and supporting the underground church of North Korea will be the best international civil society and like-minded democracies can do to empower the people of North Korea and enact peaceful transformation from within.

A Human Rights Upfront Approach, Including Religious Freedom

In order to promote religious freedom in North Korea, an approach to North Korean policy featuring human rights issues more prominently will be needed, in addition to highlighting other critical issues, such as North Korea's nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and its exportation of instability and violence to the Middle East and the Ukrainian front, through arms and ammunition sales to Iran and its proxies as well as Russia.

To procure the hard currency needed to develop its nuclear and missile programs, the North Korean regime oppresses and exploits its people at home and abroad. The very nature of a regime armed with nuclear weapons, that commits crimes against humanity is a threat to regional and international peace and security. There is a direct connection between North Korea's human rights violations and the threats it poses to international peace and security, and thus the human rights-security nexus must be emphasized.

A Human Rights Upfront Strategy, Including Promoting Religious Freedom

A strategy promoting human rights in North Korea must involve: the ROK and US governments and the governments of like-minded democratic UN member states; the private sector, in particular IT and AI companies; and international civil society, including ROK, US, Japanese, and EU civil society organizations (CSOs) that can generate content, information, and analysis critical to understanding and influencing North Korea's human rights and information environment. Moreover, efforts should be directed towards enlisting UN member states in the Global South to engage in pro-active measures addressing the North Korean human rights crisis.

The Need for a Reenergized Information Campaign

Moving forward, information campaigns targeting North Korea will have to tell its people five fundamental stories: the story of their own human rights, especially their lack of religious freedom, which the Kim family regime has abused for decades; the story of the corruption of the regime elites, especially the inner core of the Kim family; the story of the outside world, especially free, democratic, prosperous economic power house South Korea; the need for Korean unification as a matter of destiny, and not of choice, for all Koreans, who lived under the same political system, sharing the same language, culture, history, and civilization for one thousand years prior to the 1945 division; and the North Korean people's right to self-determination. Religion, especially Christianity, has been a distinctive feature of the idea of Korean nationalism, especially during the tragic times of Japanese imperial occupation (1905-1945). North Koreans must be reminded that history did not begin with Kim Il-sung. Koreans have a rich shared 5,000 year history, religion has been an important part of that history, and Christianity a critical part of Korean identity for two centuries.

Strengthening International Civil Society Participation, Including NGOs Advocating International Religious Freedom, in the UN Process

In order to effectively address the need for religious freedom and human rights compliance in North Korea, international civil society needs UN access. UN action on North Korean human rights has been centered on the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly and the UN Security Council. The Committee on NGOs of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), gatekeeper of civil society access to the UN, has not received the deserved and much needed attention. Dominated by anti-human rights undemocratic regimes, the NGO Committee strives to refuse UN ECOSOC consultative status to real human rights defenders, including NGOs advocating international religious freedom. On occasion, through the valiant and diligent efforts of the United States, Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Korea and other like-minded ECOSOC members, the NGO Committee's rigged decision to reject human rights defenders including North Korean human rights NGOs was overturned. HRNK, PSCORE, NKDB and Christian Solidarity Worldwide have obtained consultative status. But these are isolated success stories, the exception rather than the rule. In the world of North Korean human rights NGOs, dealing with a regime responsible for crimes against humanity, consultative status should be the rule, rather than the exception. In order to open wide the gates of ECOSOC consultative status access to human rights organizations, including religious rights defenders, a move that would surely displease revisionist powers Russia and China and their allies, a patient, steady, sustainable approach to NGO Committee membership change is needed. For example, while China's and perhaps India's membership may be inevitable, it is highly desirable that fellow democracies Republic of Korea and Japan seek membership. This endeavor will take more than just international cooperation among the like-minded. It will take internal inter-agency prioritization of bidding for the NGO Committee, and the respective allocation of government resources in the Republic of Korea and Japan. Despite

inherent cultural, bureaucratic, and institutional biases, this approach could be conducive to the slow, but steady creation of an international civil society platform capable of creating the pressure needed to promote religious freedom and induce overall human rights change in North Korea.