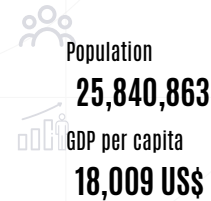
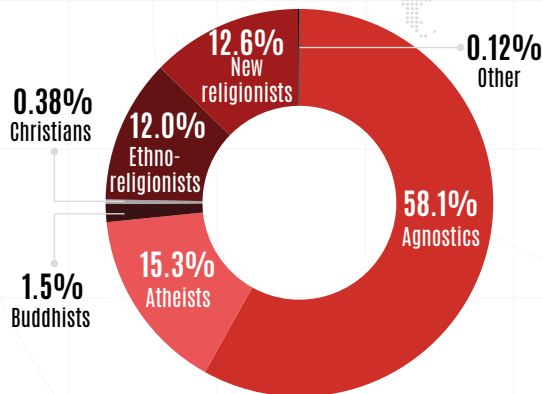




# NORTH KOREA

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

North Korea's 1972 constitution (revised in 2016)<sup>1</sup> guarantees, under Article 68, "freedom of religious belief". This right includes "approval of the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies," however, "Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order."

Article 3 of the constitution states that "the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is guided in its activities by the Juche idea and the Songun idea, a world outlook centred on people, a revolutionary ideology for achieving the independence of the masses of people." Juche (self-reliance) is an "immortal" idea, established by the country's founding leader, Kim Il Sung.<sup>2</sup>

The Preamble to the Constitution enshrines Kim Il Sung's place and that of his son and first successor in North Korea's national mythology. "The great Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are the sun of the nation and the lodestar of national reunification. Regarding the reunification of the country as the supreme national task, they devoted all their efforts and care for its realization. [...] Under the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea, the

Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Korean people will uphold the great Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as the eternal leaders of Juche Korea, and will carry the revolutionary cause of Juche through to completion by defending and carrying forward their ideas and achievements."<sup>3</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Despite stated constitutional protections, every single article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is, in some manner or another, denied to the people of North Korea. In October 2019, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Tomás Ojea Quintana, reported: "There is no freedom of expression and citizens are subject to a system of control, surveillance and punishment that violates their human rights."<sup>4</sup> In December, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning "the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights in and by" North Korea.<sup>5</sup> The General Assembly "specifically expressed its very serious concern at 'the imposition of the death penalty for political and religious reasons,' and 'all-pervasive and severe restrictions, both online and offline, on the freedoms

of thought, conscience, religion or belief, opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association.”<sup>6</sup>

North Koreans are required to show total devotion to the ruling Kim dynasty. At the heart of North Korea’s indoctrination program is the Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System (the Ten Principles)<sup>7</sup>, which form the life of each North Korean from early childhood. These Principles dictate that the entire North Korean society should believe only in the Kim family.<sup>8</sup> Any deviance or suspected disloyalty - particularly by adopting a religious belief - is punished. North Korea’s ‘Songbun’ system - categorising people according to their loyalty to the regime, and thus determining access to necessities such as health care - classifies Christians as ‘hostile’.<sup>9</sup> Christians “are especially vulnerable because the ruling Worker’s Party views them as foreign agents and the practice of Christianity is treated as a political crime. North Korean propaganda has even compared missionaries to vampires.”<sup>10</sup>

As noted in a 2014 report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the Human Rights Situation of the DPRK: “The State considers the spread of Christianity a particularly serious threat, since it challenges ideologically the official personality cult and provides a platform for social and political organization and interaction outside the realm of the State. Apart from the few organized State-controlled churches, Christians are prohibited from practising their religion and are persecuted. People caught practising Christianity are subject to severe punishments in violation of the right to freedom of religion and the prohibition of religious discrimination.”<sup>11</sup>

It is almost impossible to identify individual cases of human rights violations because very few foreigners are allowed into the country. The information gathered by international commissions and specialised NGOs is therefore crucial; even so, any findings are, at best, approximations based on researchers’ ability to analyse limited information.

According to the Database Centre for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), at least 1,341 specific cases of violations of freedom of religion or belief by the authorities in North Korea were reported between 2007 and 2018. Offences included religious propaganda and activities, possession of religious materials, and contact with people engaged in religious activities. At least 120 people were killed, 90 went missing, 48 were physically injured, 51 were deported or transferred, and 794 were detained, while 133 were placed under travel restrictions.<sup>12</sup>

In 2020, Open Doors stated an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 North Koreans were imprisoned for being Christian. In the report, they note: “If North Korean Christians are discovered ... not only are they deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, their families will share their fate as well.”<sup>13</sup>

A 2nd February 2019 Associated Press article interviewing defectors, detailed how Christians in North Korea live: “Most of North Korea’s underground Christians do not engage in the extremely dangerous work of proselytizing. Instead, they largely keep their beliefs to themselves or within their immediate families. But even those who stay deep underground face danger.”<sup>14</sup>

The capital, Pyongyang, has five government-sanctioned churches (three Protestant, one Catholic, and one Orthodox), but experts suggest they are show churches for the benefit of foreign visitors - “fakes aimed at covering up the nation’s religious abuse and winning outside aid.”<sup>15</sup>

Yeo-sang Yoon and Sun-young Han of the North Korean Human Rights Archives and Database Center present an insight into the North Korean imprisonment policy, stating: “According to the outcome of an intensive survey on the level of punishment against those involved in religious activities, only 2.9 percent of those arrested are sent to labor training camps.” [...] “By contrast, 14.9 percent are sent to prisons and an astonishing 81.4 percent to political prisons camps, the harshest level of punishment in North Korean society. This testifies how severely the regime punishes those involved in religious activities.”<sup>16</sup>

Folk religion and superstitious beliefs are not exempt from repression. In a public trial in March 2019, three women in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province, were convicted of fortune telling; two were publicly executed and the third was sentenced to life in prison.<sup>17</sup>

In 2019, the North Korean regime launched a crackdown against Falun Gong practitioners. The Buddha-inspired spiritual movement is severely persecuted in China, but has grown in North Korea thanks to North Korean migrants working across the border in China. In April 2019, North Korean authorities issued an order that Falun Gong practitioners should report their status, the first time the government has taken such a step. According to Radio Free Asia, the order threatened harsh punishments for those failing to report. Soon afterwards, police arrested 100 people in Pyongyang’s Songyo District for Falun Gong practices.<sup>18</sup>

A 2020 study<sup>19</sup> released by the Korea Future Initiative (KFI), an advocacy group dedicated to human rights in North Korea, provides further evidence of the persecution of Christians north of the 38th parallel. Titled *Persecuting Faith: Documenting religious freedom violations in North Korea*, the study is based on 117 interviews with survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators over a period of seven months. It reveals that violations of freedom of religion or belief remain widespread in North Korea.

KFI's research identified 273 victims of religious repression, 215 Christians and 56 ethno-religionists (shamanists), with ages ranging from three years-old to over 80 years-old. Women and girls accounted for nearly 60 percent of the documented victims. Criminal charges included: religious practice, religious activities in China, possessing religious items, contact with religious persons, attending places of worship, and sharing religious beliefs. The resulting violations included: arbitrary arrest, arbitrary detention, arbitrary imprisonment, arbitrary interrogation, refoulement, punishment of family members, torture and sustained physical assault, sexual violence, execution, public trials and resident exposure meetings.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to North Korea's violations of freedom of religion and belief, it is important to consider the policy and practice of the People's Republic of China vis-à-vis North Koreans fleeing into its territory. In violation of international humanitarian principles of non-refoulement, Beijing has a policy of forcible repatriation resulting in almost certain imprisonment, torture and sometimes execution. On 28th April 2019, a North Korean family of seven who had escaped to China were arrested, detained, and faced forcible repatriation. The group included a nine-year-old and a 17-year-old. A relative appealed for help. In view of the situation, Justice for North Korea, a Seoul-based NGO, said that "international organizations and the international community are the only way to save the lives of these seven at risk."<sup>21</sup> North Koreans who leave their country unauthorised face criminal charges. North Koreans forcibly repatriated have been detained in political prison camps or similar facilities. In some cases, they have been executed.<sup>22</sup>

North Korea is already the world's most isolated nation; as a consequence of COVID-19 it is even more inaccessible. This makes it extremely difficult to obtain and assess reliable and verifiable information about the scale of the pandemic in the country, and its impact on religious

freedom. One effect of the health crisis is the complete closure of its borders and the imposition of harsher travel restrictions. North Korea has in fact told China that it does not want to take back its citizens currently held in China.<sup>23</sup>

Leading North Korea expert Suzanne Scholte, president of the Washington-based Defense Forum Foundation, sees this as a "golden opportunity to rescue the lives of North Korean defectors detained in China."<sup>24</sup> In an October 2020 open letter published in the Seoul-based Chosun Ilbo newspaper, Ms. Scholte urged South Korea's President Moon Jae-in to appeal to China's President Xi Jinping to free all North Korean defectors now held in Chinese detention centres, and allow them to travel to South Korea.<sup>25</sup>

Over the past few decades, more than 33,000 North Korean refugees<sup>26</sup> have already resettled in South Korea after escaping from the north, but thousands remain in China. As Ms. Scholte wrote: "Most of these refugees were trying to reach their families in the Republic of Korea, a crime which makes them subject to execution if forced back to North Korea. Some of these refugees have become Christians, which means they are also subjected to immediate execution. Among them are young children."<sup>27</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

In 2018, historic talks were held between North and South Korean leaders, and between Kim Jong-Un and US President Donald Trump. This brought some hope for a possible thawing of relations, though with no further rapprochement and no tangible long-term policy changes in the North, aspirations for any further opening have faded. On 18th October 2018, South Korean President Moon Jae-in conveyed a handwritten letter from North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to Pope Francis, inviting him to visit Pyongyang. South Korean chief press secretary Yoon Young-chan said: "The pope told President Moon that he would immediately respond to the invitation once he officially receives one."<sup>28</sup>

Notwithstanding these overtures, the reality is as long as Kim Jong-Un's dictatorship, with its deification of the Kim dynasty, continues in its current form, prospects for improvements in freedom of religion or belief are without hope. Only in the case of profound and lasting political and social reforms, or regime change, can any improvements in human rights, and progress in the area of freedom of religion or belief, be expected.

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