

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief, with the stipulation that “religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order.” In July, the UN Secretary-General reported to the UN General Assembly that there was a “growing body of information confirming consistent patterns of human rights violations” carried out in places of detention. He cited a report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that the government was systematically attacking persons it considered a threat, including persons who practice religion, imprisoning individuals without due process, and subjecting them to “physical and mental suffering amounting to torture.” The Secretary General also stated COVID-19 restrictions in the country further limited freedoms, including of thought, conscience, and religion. In October, the UN special rapporteur on human rights stated that exercise of freedom of religion in the country was “nearly impossible.” Multiple sources indicated the situation had not changed since publication of the 2014 *Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the DPRK*. The COI found the government almost completely denied the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In many instances, the COI determined that the government committed violations of human rights that constituted crimes against humanity. The government reportedly continued to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals engaged in almost any religious activities. The country’s inaccessibility and lack of timely information continued to limit the availability of details related to individual cases of abuse and made estimates of the number and composition of religious groups difficult to verify. United Kingdom-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Korea Future stated the government’s denial of religious freedom was absolute and cited multiple incidents of arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and inhuman treatment, and executions directed against individuals because of their religious belief; officials principally targeted Christians and followers of Shamanism. The NGO Open Doors USA (ODUSA) estimated authorities held 50,000 to 70,000 citizens in prison for being Christian. For the 20th year in a row, it ranked the country number one on its list of countries where Christians experienced “extreme persecution” and said “[b]eing discovered as a Christian is a death sentence in North Korea.” The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), a Republic of Korea (ROK)-based NGO, citing defectors who arrived in the ROK from 2007 until July 2020 and other sources, reported 1,411 cases of religious persecution by DPRK authorities, including 126 killings and 94 disappearances. In

October, Korea Future released a report on religious freedom violators in the country. Of the victims interviewed for the report, 150 adhered to Shamanism, 91 adhered to Christianity, one to Cheondogyo, and one to other beliefs. The report described violations against these victims including arrest, detention, forced labor, torture, denial of fair trial, deportation, denial of right to life, and sexual violence. NGOs and defectors said the government often arrested or otherwise punished family members of Christians. According to NGOs, the government used religious organizations and facilities for external propaganda and political purposes.

The government encouraged all citizens to report anyone engaged in religious activity or in possession of religious material. There were reports of private Christian religious activity in the country, although the existence of underground churches and the scope of underground religious networks remained difficult to quantify. Defector accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from family members, neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to fear of being branded as disloyal and concerns their activities would be reported to authorities. Some defector and NGO reports confirmed unapproved religious materials were available clandestinely. According to the UN special rapporteur, for the second year in a row the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation (KCF) again did not participate in the annual “inter-Korean prayer for Korean Peninsula peace and reunification” held every year since 1989 ahead of National Liberation Day on August 15, stating that “a joint prayer between the two Koreas would be meaningless at this point.”

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK. The United States cosponsored a resolution adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly in December that again condemned the country’s “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights” and expressed very serious concern about abuses, including imposition of the death penalty for religious reasons and restrictions on the freedoms of conscience and religion or belief. The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country.

Since 2001, the DPRK has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 15, 2021, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions to which North Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of

the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 25.8 million (midyear 2021). The North Korean government last reported religious demographics in 2002 and estimates of the number of total adherents of different religious groups vary. In 2002, the government reported to the UN Human Rights Committee there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, 800 Catholics, and 15,000 practitioners of Chondoism, also known as Cheondogyo, a modern religious movement based on a 19th century Korean neo-Confucian movement. ROK and other foreign religious groups estimate the number of religious practitioners is considerably higher than reported by authorities. According to the Religious Characteristics of States Dataset Project, in 2015 the population was 70.9 percent atheist, 11 percent Buddhist, 1.7 percent followers of other religions, and 16.5 percent unknown. UN estimates place the Christian population at between 200,000 and 400,000. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates there are 100,000 Christians, and ODUSA estimates the country has 400,000 Christians. In its 2020 World Christian Database, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity reported 57 percent of the population is agnostic; 16 percent atheist; 13 percent “new religionists” (believers in syncretic religions); 12 percent “ethnoreligionists” (believers in folk religions); and 1.5 percent Buddhists. Christians, Muslims, and Chinese folk religionists make up less than 0.5 percent of the population collectively. The NKDB reported that among defectors practicing a religion, the majority were Protestant, with a smaller number of Catholics, Buddhists, and others. The COI report stated, based on the government’s own figures, the proportion of religious adherents among the population dropped from close to 24 percent in 1950 to 0.016 percent in 2002. Consulting shamans and fortune tellers and engaging in Shamanistic rituals is reportedly widespread but difficult to quantify. According to Korea Future, Shamanism is the most widespread religious practice in the country, is practiced in every province, and includes adherents from all levels of social strata. In his report issued in October, the UN special rapporteur on human rights cited an estimate by a civil society organization, which he did not identify, that there were 300 Protestant pastors, no Catholic priests, 250 Cheondoist leaders, 300 Buddhist monks, and five Russian Orthodox priests in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that citizens have freedom of religious belief and that this right is granted through the approval of the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies. It further states, "Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the state or social order."

According to a 2014 official government document, "Freedom of religion is allowed and provided by the State law within the limit necessary for securing social order, health, social security, morality and other human rights."

The country's criminal code punishes a "person who, without authorization, imports, makes, distributes, or illegally keeps drawings, photographs, books, video recordings, or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal, or foul contents." The criminal code also bans engagement in "superstitious activities in exchange for money or goods." According to local sources, this prohibition includes fortune telling. According to the NGO Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), under these two provisions, ownership of religious materials brought in from abroad is illegal and punishable by imprisonment and other forms of severe punishment, including execution.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

There were reports the government continued to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals engaged in almost any religious activities. The country's inaccessibility and lack of timely information continued to make individual arrests and punishments difficult to verify. The July 28 UN Secretary-General's report *Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, covering the period August 2020 to July 2021, stated that interviews with escapees from the country added to "the growing body of information confirming consistent patterns of human rights violations" carried out in places of detention. It cited the report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Human Rights Council that the government was systematically attacking persons it considered a threat, including persons who practice religion, imprisoning individuals without due process and subjecting them to "physical and mental suffering amounting to torture," as well as providing detainees, including those forced to engage in hard labor, with inadequate food. According to the report, there was a widespread fear among the population that acts deemed "disloyal,"

including engaging in religious activities, would cause them to be sent to a political prison camp. The report also stated, "COVID-19 restrictions in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea further limited people's rights to freedom of expression, including access to information, to freedom of association and of peaceful assembly, and to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."

In his October 8 report to the General Assembly, titled *Situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, the UN special rapporteur stated that exercise of freedom of religion in the country was "nearly impossible," citing "a lack of access to information related to religion and religious activities, criminalization of imported items without authorization, absence of religious facilities except in Pyongyang, and surveillance by neighbors and authorities." The report stated that Christians are categorized as a "hostile class" in the country's *songbun* system of social classification and are targeted as a "serious threat to loyalty to the state." Escapees who are repatriated to the country from China are interrogated about any contacts with Christian groups there. According to civil society organizations cited in the report, government surveillance and penalties against Shamanism, and especially influential shamans, have increased since the government issued an edict in 2017 to root out "superstitious" acts, and anyone violating the law against "superstitious" behavior is subject to seven years' imprisonment and correctional labor.

Multiple sources indicated the situation in the country had not changed since publication of the 2014 COI final report, which concluded there was an almost complete denial by the government of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information, and association. It further concluded that in many instances, the violations of human rights committed by the government constituted crimes against humanity, and it recommended the United Nations ensure those most responsible for the crimes against humanity were held accountable.

The government maintained national emergency quarantine measures first implemented in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and again ordered the public to refrain from attending large gatherings, including weddings, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies, and observance of ancestral rites.

In October, Korea Future released a report entitled *Persecuting Faith: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea, Volume 2*. The report was based on interviews with 244 victims of religious freedom violations. Of these, 150 adhered to Shamanism, 91 adhered to Christianity, one to Cheondogyo,

and one to other beliefs. The victims ranged in age from two to more than 80 years old. Women and girls accounted for more than 70 percent of documented victims. According to the report, the government charged individuals with engaging in religious practices, conducting religious activities in China, possessing religious items, having contact with religious persons, and sharing religious beliefs. Individuals were subject to arrest, detention, forced labor, torture, denial of fair trial, deportation, denial of right to life, and sexual violence.

In the report, several victims who were imprisoned for practicing Shamanism described conditions in prison camps. One victim said, “[Officials] worked us hard without feeding us properly. . . I suffered from malnutrition and was sure I would not survive. I kept having diarrhea, even when I only drank water, and I weighed just 35 kilograms [77 pounds]. Today I weigh 60 kilograms [132 pounds], so I was like a skeleton back then. I had to wear children’s clothes, as nothing else fit me.” Others described or showed signs of being beaten, ingesting contaminated food, being forced into uncomfortable positions for long periods of time, and receiving verbal abuse. The report also described religious freedom violations against Christians. One case involved the 2009 arrest of a family based on their religious practices and possession of a Bible. The entire family, including a two-year-old child, were given life sentences in political prison camps. Christians also described horrible conditions in prison camps and various forms of torture. The report stated that the Ministry of State Security was responsible for 90 percent of documented human rights violations against both Shamanic adherents and Christians.

In January, ODUSA published a report entitled *North Korea: Country Dossier*. The report identified the country as the one where Christians faced the “most extreme persecution.” It identified Communist doctrine and the cult of personality surrounding leader Kim Jong Un as the main drivers of religious persecution. According to the report, Christians were regarded as enemies of the government’s ideology.

The NKDB, relying on reports from defectors and other sources, aggregated 1,411 specific cases of abuses of the right to freedom of religion or belief by authorities within the country from 2007 to July 2020. Charges included propagation of religion, possession of religious materials, religious activity, and contact with religious practitioners. Of the 1,411 cases, authorities reportedly killed 126 individuals (8.9 percent), disappeared 94 (6.7 percent), physically injured 79 (5.6 percent), deported or forcibly relocated 53 (3.8 percent), detained 826 (58.5

percent), restricted movement of 147 (10.4 percent), and persecuted 86 (6.1 percent) using other methods of punishment.

The NGO NK Watch estimated that 135,000 political prisoners continued to be held in four political prison camps between September 2019 and July 2020. According to an ROK government-affiliated Korea Institute for National Unification's (KINU) 2020 white paper on human rights, the government operated five political prison camps. ODUSA estimated that at the end of 2020, the government held 50,000 to 70,000 citizens in prison for being Christians, and it said that Kim Jong Un has expanded the system of prison camps. ODUSA continued to state the government maintained a policy of arresting or otherwise punishing relatives of Christians, meaning officials could detain them regardless of their beliefs.

In its 2020 report, NKDB stated that 35.4 percent of individuals who defected from the country in 2019 said authorities punished those caught practicing religion by sending them to political prison camps, 18.4 percent said authorities sent them to regular prisons, and 15 percent said authorities sent them to labor training camps.

In its annual *World Watch List* report, ODUSA for the 20th year in a row ranked the country number one on its watch list of countries where the government persecutes Christians. The NGO stated in its dossier, "Being discovered as a Christian is a death sentence in North Korea. If you aren't killed instantly, you will be taken to a labor camp as a political criminal. These inhumane prisons have horrific conditions, and few believers make it out alive. Everyone in your family will share the same punishment," and, "Most Christians are unable to meet with other believers, and have to keep their faith entirely hidden." The ODUSA dossier stated increased diplomatic activity starting with and following the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in the ROK in February 2018 did not improve religious freedom for Christians in the country. According to the dossier, police raids aimed at identifying and punishing citizens with "deviating thoughts," including Christians, reportedly increased.

In an August report, Korea Future identified 68 cases of government prosecution of individuals for religion or belief or their association with religious persons, based on interviews with survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators, most of whom had fled the country in 2019. Of the 68 cases, 43 involved adherents of Shamanism, 24 involved Christians, and one Cheondogyo. Punishments included arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and denial of life. The report said it found active mobilization of organs of the government

enforced the absolute denial of religious freedom. Officials surveilled persons' activities, indoctrinated them in mandatory lectures against engaging in religious crimes or practicing "superstition," and warned them of the penalties for violators. The report concluded, "The campaign to exterminate all Christian adherents and institutions in North Korea has been brutally effective..." It added that under Kim Jong Un, persecution of followers of Shamanism had increased and "many forms of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment have been experienced by Shamanic and Christian adherents alike."

According to the report, there are two systems of sentencing those accused of crimes related to religious beliefs. One is a public prosecution involving the Ministry of People's Security and the Prosecutor's office. Sentences, which apply almost exclusively to followers of Shamanism, range from six months in a forced labor camp to three or more years in a reeducation facility. However, the report said there had been cases where followers of Shamanism had been executed. The other system is a secret prosecution handled by the Ministry of State Security, exclusively for cases involving Christians, with typical sentences ranging from 15 years in a prison camp to life in a prison camp, imposed on up to three generations of the immediate family of the person found guilty. The report said it had received credible reports from former security officials of the execution of Christians. Examples included a firing squad execution of a Christian woman and her grandchild in North Hamgyong Province in 2011 and another of six Christians in South Hwanghae Province in 2015. Public trials outside of the courtroom or public criticism also served as extrajudicial punishments for religious followers. Mandatory participation of children in these trials or sessions was common.

The report documented multiple cases of torture or other cruel treatment, including beatings, forcing prisoners to adopt fixed positions for prolonged periods, deprivation of food, water, and sleep, contaminated food, body cavity searches, hanging torture (known as "pigeon torture"), and exposure to extreme violence inflicted on fellow prisoners. One interviewee said, "They hit you less for superstition, as it is not an enemy-related offense like religion." Another man said guards beat a Christian man who had been praying to the brink of death, leaving him bleeding on the ground. The man, however, continued to pray daily, even as guards would beat him with a club and kick him with their boots on. Authorities also frequently beat followers of Shamanism. A man accused of aiding a shaman said, "They threw me into a cell and broke my legs before anything else." Officials placed a man who smuggled a Bible into the country in solitary confinement, where authorities beat him with a metal rod and gave him one meal a

day of boiled corn kernels. Another detainee said, "They [guards] would dash my head against the wall and people downstairs would hear the sound."

Religious organizations and human rights groups outside the country continued to report that government officials had arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed members of underground churches because of their religious beliefs. One defector told Korea Future that authorities beat Christian and Shamanic adherents in custody, gave them contaminated food, and arbitrarily executed them. One prisoner who was released in October 2020 told Radio Free Asia (RFA) that prison authorities treated Christians especially harshly, and subjected them to beating, sleep deprivation, positional torture, and execution. She recounted that after authorities forced them to stand up for 40 days, tortured inmates lost the capacity to sit down and collapsed. Another defector told the NKDB in 2020 that in 2002, officials denied a Christian man food, causing his death in three days. Another defector told the NKDB in 2020 that in 2013 or 2014, the government executed a Christian man under detention for expressing his belief in God. Another defector told the NKDB in 2020 that prison officials consistently denied a Christian woman under solitary confinement the ability to sleep, leading her to commit suicide in the bathroom.

According to Korea Future, the government persecuted members of religious groups on such charges as engaging in religious practice, engaging in religious activities in China, possessing Bibles or other religious items, having contact with religious persons, attending religious services, and sharing religious beliefs. It added that the government subjected religious believers to arbitrary surveillance, interrogation, arrest, detention, imprisonment, punishment of family members, forced labor, sexual violence, torture, and execution. Korea Future cited Christian reports of torture that included, "being forced to hang on steel bars while being beaten with a wooden club; being hung by their legs; having their body tightly bound with sticks; being forced to perform 'squat-jumps' and to sit and stand hundreds or thousands of times each day; having a liquid made with red pepper powder forcibly poured into their nostrils; being forced to kneel with a wooden bar inserted between their knee hollows; strangulation; being forced to witness the execution or torture of other prisoners; starvation; being forced to ingest polluted food; being forced into solitary confinement; being deprived of sleep; and being forced to remain seated and still for up to and beyond 12 hours a day." Korea Future reported that Protestants were most vulnerable to persecution, followed by adherents of Shamanism, whom government officials subjected to torture and physical assault.

Korea Future reported that officials repeatedly warned citizens in lectures and “people’s unit meetings” not to read Bibles and to report anyone who owned a Bible. The report documented multiple instances in which authorities found an individual in possession of a Bible and sent the person and other household members to prison. In one case, officials arrested a Korean Workers’ Party member for possessing a Bible and executed the individual at Hyesan airfield in front of 3,000 residents. Another respondent told investigators that authorities arrested a relative for possessing a cross and a Bible after the relative’s partner reported the individual to authorities.

In 2019, the Christian advocacy group Voice of the Martyrs USA (VOM) posted to YouTube what it described as a “government training video.” In the video, the narrator tells the story of a Christian named Cha Deoksun from Sariwon City who crossed the border illegally into China, where she converted to Christianity. The narrator said the pastors of the church were disguised members of the ROK secret service and converts were “spies.” Upon returning to North Korea, Cha traveled around the country preaching and organizing an underground church. The narrator described Cha as a “religious fanatic” and “good-for-nothing.” According to the video, she converted her family and other “worthless people.” At some point, “one of our conscientious citizens” reported Cha to authorities and she was arrested. VOM stated, “It is unclear how Deoksun died, but it is possible that she was executed.”

According to the NKDB, in 2016, there were forced disappearances of persons found to be practicing religion within detention facilities. One defector told the NKDB in 2020 that in 2005, a Christian man in custody who sang a hymn had been forcibly removed that night.

International NGOs and North Korean defectors continued to report that any religious activities conducted outside of those that were state-sanctioned, including praying, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, could lead to severe punishment, including imprisonment in political prison camps. According to KINU’s 2020 white paper on human rights, authorities punished both “superstitious activities” including fortune telling and religious activities, but the latter more severely. KINU stated that in general, punishment was very strict when citizens or defectors had studied or possessed a Bible or were involved with Christian missionaries, and that authorities frequently punished those involved in “superstitious activity” with forced labor, which reportedly could be avoided by bribery.

Korea Future documented cases in which the government targeted family members of persons who had been charged with crimes associated with religion. In certain incidents, this led to the arrests of children as young as three. In other incidents, officials arrested entire families. Investigators also documented incidents in which officials forced the spouses of persons sentenced for religious crimes to divorce them.

In December, Korea Future published a report entitled *Religious Women as Beacons of Resistance in North Korea*. The report was based on 237 interviews with survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Of a sample size of 151, the report found violations experienced by Christian women included 140 cases of arbitrary deprivation of liberty; five cases of forced labor; 33 cases of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; one case of sexual violence including rape, and 11 cases of refoulement. Of a sample size of 180, the report found violations experienced by Shamanic women included 157 cases of arbitrary deprivation of liberty; 53 cases of forced labor; 26 cases of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; and one case of sexual violence including rape. Perpetrators of violations included officials from the Ministry of People’s Security, Ministry of State Security, PRC Ministry of Public Security, and other DPRK organizations. For religious women ages 40 to 60, the reasons cited for violations included being engaged in religious practice in the country, engaging in religious practice in China, attending a place of worship, possessing religious items, having contact with religious persons, being arrested based on an informant, and sharing religious belief. Korea Future concluded religious women in the country “experience discrimination twofold based on their gender and religious or belief identities.” The organization also stated, “Established patterns of conduct endanger women and contribute to their brutalisation and harassment in the penal system, their trafficking and prostitution across North Korea and China, their marginalisation in economic life, and their denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.”

According to RFA, authorities launched crackdowns on Falun Gong practitioners in 2019. There were no recent reports saying whether the crackdown was ongoing.

There was no further information on foreigners accused of being engaged in religious activity within the country’s borders: Kim Jung-wook, detained in October 2013; Kim Guk-gi, detained in October 2014; or Choi Chun-gil, detained in December 2014 – three ROK missionaries detained in the country and sentenced to life in prison for “spying and scheming.” In December 2018, *The Korea Times* reported the ROK government tried to negotiate their release.

In 2020, VOM undertook a letter writing campaign to urge the government to release Jang Moon Seok (aka Zhang Wen Shi), an ethnic-Korean Chinese national living in Changbai, China, on the border with North Korea. VOM stated that “Deacon Jang” assisted North Koreans who crossed the border and shared his faith with them. According to VOM, in November 2014, North Korean authorities kidnapped Jang from China, imprisoned him, and sentenced him to 15 years in prison.

In 2019, the HRNK reported the government continued to promote a policy that all citizens, young and old, participate in local defense and be willing to mobilize for national defense purposes. The government provided neither exceptions for these requirements nor any alternative to military service for conscientious objectors.

Juche (“self-reliance”) and *Suryong* (“supreme leader”) remained important ideological underpinnings of the government and the cults of personality of previous leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, as well as current leader Kim Jong Un. According to the KINU’s 2019 white paper, the DPRK did not allow any ideology or religion other than its *Juche* ideology. The government regarded refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority as opposition to the national interest, and this reportedly resulted in severe punishment. Numerous scholars stated the *Juche* philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resembled a form of state-sponsored theology. Approximately 100,000 *Juche* research centers reportedly existed throughout the country. KINU’s 2019 white paper reported one defector as saying, “North Korea oppresses religion, particularly Christianity, because of the sense that the one-person dictatorship can be undermined by religious faith.”

The 2014 COI report found the government considered Christianity a serious threat that challenged the official cults of personality and provided a platform for social and political organization and interaction outside the government. The report concluded that the government persecuted, imposed violence, and heavily punished Christians if they practiced their religion outside state-controlled churches. The report further recommended the country allow Christians and other religious believers to exercise their religions independently and publicly without fear of punishment, reprisal, or surveillance.

As it had in years past, KINU stated in its 2020 annual white paper on human rights that it was “practically impossible for North Korean people to have a religion in their daily lives.” According to the NKDB, the constitution represented

only a nominal freedom granted to political supporters, and only when the regime deemed it necessary to use it as a policy tool. A survey of 14,832 refugees between 2007 and February 2020 by the NKDB found 99.6 percent said that religious activities were not tolerated in the country. Only 2.0 percent of interviewees said they had visited religious facilities, compared with 2.5 percent cited in the NKDB's 2019 report.

According to the NKDB, the ROK government estimated that as of 2018, there were 121 religious facilities in the DPRK, including 60 Buddhist temples, 52 Chondoist temples, three Protestant churches, and one Russian Orthodox church, all mostly under state control.

In its 2020 report, KINU stated the government continued to use religious organizations as authorized by the government for external propaganda and political purposes and reported citizens were strictly barred from entering approved facilities for use as places of worship. Ordinary citizens considered such places primarily as "sightseeing spots for foreigners." KINU concluded the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated ordinary citizens did not have religious freedom. In its 2020 annual report, the NKDB stated, "Although there are several churches and other religious facilities in North Korea, such as Chilgol and Bongsu Church, as well as Jangchung Cathedral, they are sponsored entirely by the state, and therefore access to the facilities for the sake of genuine religious activity, especially for regular citizens, is heavily restricted." The 2014 COI report concluded that authorities systematically sought to hide from the international community the persecution of Christians who practiced their religion outside state-controlled churches by pointing to the small number of state-controlled churches as exemplifying religious freedom and pluralism.

The five state-controlled Christian churches in Pyongyang include three Protestant churches (Bongsu, Chilgol, and Jeil Churches), a Catholic church (Changchung Cathedral), and the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Chilgol Church was dedicated to the memory of former leader Kim Il Sung's mother, Kang Pan Sok, a Presbyterian deaconess. The number of congregants regularly worshipping at these churches was unknown, and there was no information on whether scheduled services were available at these locations. Some defectors who previously lived in or near Pyongyang reported knowing about these churches. In KINU's 2019 report, one defector said that when he lived in Pyongyang, authorities arrested individuals, whom they believed lingered too long outside these churches to listen to the music or consistently drove past them each week when services were being

held, on suspicion of being secret Christians. This defector also said authorities quickly realized one unintended consequence of allowing music at the services and permitting persons to attend church was that many attendees converted to Christianity, and therefore authorities took steps to mitigate that outcome. Numerous other defectors from outside Pyongyang reported no knowledge of these churches. According to KINU, in years past, foreign Christians who visited the country stated they witnessed church doors closed on Easter Sunday, and many foreign visitors said church activities seemed to be staged. In its 2020 dossier on North Korea, ODUSA stated, "The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes."

Foreign legislators who attended services in Pyongyang in previous years reported congregations arrived and departed services as groups on tour buses, and some observed the worshippers did not include any children. Some foreigners noted officials did not permit them to have contact with worshippers, and others stated they had limited interaction with them. Foreign observers said they had limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups but generally assumed the government monitored them closely. KINU's 2020 white paper described as an example the Bongsu Protestant Church in Pyongyang, which was built in September 1988. Defectors reported that only the building guard and the guard's family lived there, but when foreign guests came to visit, officials carefully selected and gathered several hundred citizens between the ages of 40 and 50 to participate in fake church services.

In its 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 "family worship centers." According to the 2019 KINU report, not one defector who testified for the report was aware of the existence of such "family churches." According to a survey of 12,810 defectors cited in the 2018 NKDB report, none saw any of these purported home churches, and only 1.3 percent of respondents believed they existed. Observers stated "family worship centers" could be part of the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation (KCF).

The 2018 NKDB report cited the existence of state-sanctioned religious organizations in the country, such as the KCF, Korea Buddhist Union, Korean Catholic Council, Korea Chondoist Church Central Committee, Korea Orthodox Church Committee, and Korean Council of Religionists. There was minimal information available on the activities of such organizations, except for some information on inter-Korean religious exchanges in 2015.

The Korean Catholic Council held masses at the Changchung Cathedral, but the Holy See continued not to recognize it as a Roman Catholic church. There were no Vatican-recognized Catholic priests, monks, or nuns residing in the country. In July, the Vatican Secretary of State reportedly informed ROK National Assembly Speaker Park Byeong-seug of the Pope’s willingness to visit the DPRK and “his interest in peace on the Korean Peninsula.” During an October visit to the Vatican, ROK President Moon Jae-in requested Pope Francis visit the DPRK. The Pope expressed his willingness to visit the country if he received a formal invitation. Archbishop Lazarus You Heung-sik, prefect for the Vatican Congregation for Clergy who is originally from Daejeon, ROK, told reporters, “As with the [ROK] government, the Vatican also makes efforts to foster conditions for the Pope to visit North Korea through various channels.”

According to foreign religious leaders who traveled to the country in previous years, there were Protestant pastors at Bongsu and Chilgol Churches, although it was not known if they were citizens or visiting pastors.

Five Russian Orthodox priests served at the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country. The clergy included North Koreans, several of whom had reportedly studied at the Russian Orthodox seminary in Moscow.

In 2019, United Press International cited a report by the state-run media outlet Ryomyong describing an Easter Sunday Mass at Pyongyang’s Changchung Cathedral. According to Ryomyong, citizens and foreign worshippers attended.

The NKDB stated officials conducted thorough searches of incoming packages and belongings at ports, customs checkpoints, and airports to search for religious items, as well as other items the government deemed objectionable. ODUSA reported some individuals brought audio devices containing the Bible and other religious materials from China or smuggled in radios for local residents to listen to Christian broadcasts from overseas.

According to Korea Future, beginning in kindergarten, officials taught children antireligious views, with a particular focus against Christianity. Its 2020 report stated, “While Buddhism and Cheondogyo were explained as matters of historical interest, rather than as religions, it was Christianity that was singled out for attention within the public-school system.” Multiple respondents spoke of textbooks containing sections on Christian missionaries that listed their “evil deeds,” which included rape, blood sucking, organ harvesting, murder, and

espionage. One defector told Korea Future that the government published graphic novels in which Christians coaxed children into churches and then took them to the basement to draw their blood.

In June 2020, the government demolished the joint liaison office, a building in the city of Kaesong near the border with the ROK. Some media reported that the demolition occurred in retaliation after defector groups in the ROK sent anti-DPRK government leaflets and other materials over the border. Christian media reported that items sent over the border also often contained Christian materials, including tracts and testimonies written by North Korean Christian refugees, physical Bibles, and digital copies of the Bible on flash drives. Kim Yo Jong, then first deputy director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department and the sister of Kim Jong Un, denounced those who sent the material as “betrayers” and “human scum.”

According to KINU, religion continued to be used to justify restricting individuals to the lowest class rungs of the songbun system, which classifies persons based on social class, family background, and presumed support of the regime. The songbun classification system resulted in discrimination in education, health care, employment opportunities, and residence. KINU continued to report that the government perceived religious persons and their families to be “antirevolutionary elements.”

According to KINU’s 2020 report, the government continued to view religion as a means of foreign encroachment. In the report, KINU quoted the North Korean Academy of Social Science Philosophy Institute’s *Dictionary on Philosophy* as stating, “Religion is historically seized by the ruling class to deceive the masses and was used as a means to exploit and oppress, and it has recently been used by the imperialists as an ideological tool to invade underdeveloped countries.” KINU reported authorities continued to provide education to citizens at least twice a year that emphasized ways to detect individuals who engaged in spreading Christianity.

The government reportedly continued to be concerned that ROK Christian relief and refugee assistance efforts along the northeast border with China had both humanitarian and political goals, including the overthrow of the government, and to allege that these groups were involved in intelligence gathering. The government maintained tight border controls that became even stricter in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19, hindering relief and assistance activities.

In 2019, the *Asia Times* reported that ROK-based Christian charities said the government sometimes declined aid for political reasons and that in some cases, the charities distributed the aid in secret through underground Christian networks.

In December, the UN General Assembly again passed by consensus a resolution that condemned “in the strongest terms the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights in and by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, including those that may amount to crimes against humanity[.]” The General Assembly 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[.]” The UN General Assembly also noted “the exacerbation of the existing humanitarian situation and the adverse impact on the human rights situation in the DPRK, following the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic[.]” The annual resolution encouraged the Security Council’s continued consideration of the COI’s relevant conclusion and recommendations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Due to the country’s inaccessibility, little was known about the day-to-day life of individuals practicing religion. Travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated this inaccessibility.

The 2014 COI report concluded government messaging regarding the purported evils of Christianity led to negative views of Christianity among ordinary citizens.

Defector accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to fear they would be reported to authorities. According to ODUSA, due to the constant indoctrination permeating the country, Christians were seen as hostile elements in society, and family members and neighbors were expected to report suspicious activities to the authorities, including through the network of neighborhood informers. It stated, “[C]hildren are encouraged to tell their teachers about any sign of faith in their parents’ home. A Christian is never safe.”

ODUSA reported that many Bibles, devotionals, Christian books, and songbooks to which individuals had access dated from the 1920s through the end of World War II. These were kept hidden and passed among believers. One man said persons remained careful even within their own families when teaching Christian

beliefs for fear of being reported. According to the NGO, “Meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible, and if some believers dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy.”

While some NGOs and academics estimated that up to several hundred thousand Christians practiced their faith in secret, others questioned the existence of any large-scale underground churches or concluded 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. Korea Future reported that in one case, an individual formed an underground church with a family to meet for prayer. Each founding member had been deported back to the country from China and received funding from donations outside the country. The number of members was unclear but was at least 16 in 2019. Most were women, and all had been introduced to Christianity in China. In the “government training” video released by VOM in September 2019, the narrator said Cha Deoksun and other believers met in the woods. Some defectors and NGOs said unapproved religious materials were available and that secret religious meetings occurred, spurred by cross-border contact with individuals and groups in China. NKDB stated that of the 147 interviewees who had defected in 2019, three, or 2.0 percent (1.2 percent in 2018), had practiced religion in secret, and nine, or 6.1 percent (1.8 percent in 2018), had witnessed others secretly practicing religion. NKDB also stated that 7.6 percent of defectors in 2019 said they had “seen a Bible” before fleeing the country. The report concluded from these data that although the government continued to severely restrict religion, exposure to religion appeared to be gradually increasing.

While COVID-19 restrictions prevented individuals from attending weddings and funerals, KINU reported that in prior years, religious ceremonies accompanying these events were almost unknown.

According to Korea Future, persons who practiced Shamanism were often subject to arrest. The government hung posters and issued directives warning citizens against engaging in “superstitious acts.” These directives were posted in apartment blocks. Korea Future stated that both ordinary citizens and officials illicitly practiced Shamanism. Investigators documented many persons engaging both publicly and privately in Shamanistic practices, including traditional rituals, fortune telling, physiognomy (reading the fate of an individual based on facial features), exorcism, use of talismans, use of birth charts, and tarot cards. One source told RFA it was common for individuals to consult fortune tellers before planning weddings, making business deals, handling health matters, or considering

other important decisions. One source told *Asia Press* that government officials also consulted fortune tellers about their health and careers. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of Shamanism. According to the source, however, fortune tellers who faced punishment were those “who [made] a lot of wrong predictions” and therefore did not receive the protection of officials. The source said, “The good fortune tellers are paid by officials and therefore do not get caught.” One defector who escaped in 2019 told Korea Future investigators, “People who practice Shamanism will be sentenced to a maximum of five years in a reeducation camp if the penalty is harsh. They used to be sentenced to a labor training camp for three or six months, but the sentence has been made stricter.”

According to the UN special rapporteur's October report, the KCF again did not participate in the annual “inter-Korean prayer for Korean Peninsula peace and reunification” held every year ahead of National Liberation Day on August 15, stating that “a joint prayer between the two Koreas would be meaningless at this point.” 2020 was the first year since 1989, according to the rapporteur, that the KCF did not join the National Council of Churches of the Republic of Korea in issuing this joint inter-Korean prayer. The rapporteur said he had been in communication with “relevant actors” to seek their views on how freedom of religion in the DPRK could contribute to peace on the Korean peninsula and that the Korea Peace Prayer Pastors living in the inter-Korean border area had shared their ideas on promoting peace.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK and has no official presence in the country.

The United States cosponsored a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in December that condemned the country's “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights,” and expressed very serious concern about abuses, including imposition of the death penalty for religious reasons and restrictions on the freedoms of conscience and religion or belief.

The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country. This included a November meeting of like-minded countries to coordinate actions and discuss the DPRK's human rights record. The United States made clear that addressing

human rights, including religious freedom, would significantly improve prospects for closer ties between the two countries. During the year, senior U.S. government officials met with defectors and NGOs that focused on the country.

Since 2001, the DPRK has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 15, 2021, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions to which North Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.