



North Korea:

The World's Foremost Violator of Religious Freedom

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Key Points

North Korea is ruled by a secretive totalitarian regime that is arguably the world's foremost abuser of human rights and violator of religious freedom.

As many as 70,000 Christians are detained in North Korean prisons, where many are subjected to forced labor and torture.

Chinese authorities forcibly repatriate North Korean defectors, aiding the North Korean regime's abuses against dissidents and religious adherents.

The United States should pursue policies to hold the regime accountable, such as including human rights in negotiations, sanctioning officials, disseminating information within North Korea, and pressuring China.

Summary

Shrouded in secrecy, North Korea remains one of the world's most mysterious countries. Unfortunately, what we do know about the "hermit kingdom" indicates the country is one of the world's worst abusers of human rights, including the right to religious freedom.

The North Korean regime has engaged in an intense crackdown on religion for decades. Today, few religious believers remain, and those who do face grave peril.

The regime's secretive nature makes it difficult for American leaders to address these human rights issues. But the gravity of the situation calls on Western countries to take every action possible to relieve the suffering of the North Korean people, who cannot speak for themselves.

This report can be read online at frc.org/NorthKorea

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Introduction

“I was beaten with a club by a preliminary investigation officer and was kicked by the officer. The treatment was particularly harsh at the Ministry of State Security. If one is found to have gone to a South Korean church while staying in China, they are dead. I therefore tried hard not to reveal my life in China. I was beaten up as a result. I was beaten to a level that my rib was broken. I still feel the pain.”¹

– North Korean defector

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the North Korean regime doubled down on border security, and the number of citizens who successfully escaped the country reached its lowest level in over 20 years. Only 67 North Korean defectors made it to freedom in South Korea in 2022, compared to 1,047 in 2019.²

The immense difficulty of escaping the country adds to concerns for North Koreans of faith. Religious adherents who remain in North Korea live in constant fear of discovery. The UN secretary-general reports that “the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion ... continues to be denied, with no alternative belief systems tolerated by the authorities.”³ Meanwhile, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un is still pursuing nuclear weapons, alarming neighbors in the region with aggressive actions, and committing some of the most heinous human rights abuses happening in the world today.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Kim Jong Un rules his country with ruthless brutality. He is responsible for all manner of human rights abuses occurring on his watch, including torture, rape, enslavement, starvation, and murder. The North Korean system of governance is designed to instill terror in its people, ensuring they never step out of line. No one is more familiar with this strategy than North Korea's Christians.

Christians are regularly sent to the most depraved North Korean labor camps. Defectors caught in China and forcibly repatriated back to North Korea face a worse fate than most if they admit to encountering Christians or attending church while in China. Many defectors have testified that the first question North Korean security agents ask in interrogations upon their return is whether they met South Korean Christians or missionaries.

The closed nature of the North Korean regime and the absence of a normal diplomatic relationship between North Korea and the United States makes typical human rights policy proposals impossible. If the United States and other nations want to improve the human rights conditions of the North Korean people, it will require thoughtful and assertive proposals. Although the task set before policymakers and diplomats is difficult, the chance of easing the oppression of North Korean citizens currently imprisoned or tortured simply for their beliefs makes this a goal worth pursuing.

History of Religion in North Korea

Today, North Korea is an atheistic nation where religious believers, especially Christians, have endured decades of targeted persecution. This is a key component of the state's efforts to eradicate religious belief. Yet, this was not always the case. The Korean peninsula was known as a hub of Christianity just a century ago. The early 1900s saw a period of immense growth for Christianity there, earning Pyongyang the moniker "Jerusalem of the East."⁴ Some of today's North Korean Christians learned of the faith because their families passed it down from this time.

Things changed abruptly when a communist regime took power in 1948. Kim Il Sung took measures to suppress Christianity almost immediately. Restrictions on churches and religious practice grew tighter with time. Throughout the late 1940s and 50s, Christians were systematically imprisoned, driven into

exile, and executed. Kim Il Sung told the People's Safety Agency, charged with acting as secret political police, in a public speech in 1962:

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.⁵

With the enforced absence of public religious expression, Kim Il Sung successfully consolidated power and built a personality cult around himself.⁶ To reinforce his status as a god-like dictator and to affirm the communist party's agenda, the government promoted the ideology of *Juche*, often translated as "self-reliance." The sentiment behind *Juche* is a rejection of dependence on others and the conviction that a proper show of revolutionary spirit will enable North Korea to survive on its own as a socialist state. This ideology ignores the fact that North Korea has long depended on the Soviet Union and China for financial support and security. Even South Korea has spent over \$5.8 billion on aid and development projects in North Korea since 1991.⁷

Some scholars liken *Juche* to a religion since it holds many of the elements often associated with religion, including a comprehensive belief system, holy places, and distinctive customs. The concept of *Juche* guides much of North Korea's propaganda and is featured in news reports, school curricula, and state-approved pop songs.⁸ Around 100,000 *Juche* "research centers" exist to promote the ideology. Local North Korean officials reinforce the government's complete control over the lives of its people through weekly meetings praising the Kim dictators and self-criticism sessions for confessing any wrongdoings or lack of socialist fervor for the regime.⁹

Traditionally, people on the Korean peninsula adhered to an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism or Buddhism.¹⁰ Shamanism remains popular in North Korea.¹¹ These more indigenous faiths are thought to contribute to North Korea's cultural heritage and do not experience the intense crackdown that Christianity does. Reports sometimes surface of authorities' measures against the practice of shamanism.¹²

Due to the regime's secretive nature, an accurate estimate of the number of religious believers in North Korea is difficult to ascertain. Some estimate that 14 percent of the population follows Chondoism, four percent follows Buddhism, and two percent follows Christianity.¹³

What's Happening Now

When Ji Hyeona was growing up in North Korea, the word "faith" meant being loyal to the Kim family dictators. One day, she was taken to the local Ministry of State Security without warning, where she was beaten and tortured. She was unsure why she was being singled out for such treatment.¹⁴

Then, the authorities placed Ji's Bible on the desk in front of her. It was a Bible her mother had brought back to North Korea after a trip to China, and Ji had begun to read it. Sadly, her own friend had reported her to the government for possessing a Bible. At the time, Ji was able to talk her way out of further punishment, but she was informed she would not be forgiven if this happened again.¹⁵

This would not be Ji's last encounter with North Korean authorities. She managed the difficult escape from North Korea four times—and was forcibly repatriated back to North Korea by Chinese authorities three times. Twice in China, Ji was forced into prostitution, and during one repatriation to North Korea, she returned pregnant. Because "mixed-race" babies are not recognized in North Korea, Ji was forced to endure a brutal and heartbreaking forced abortion.¹⁶

Too many North Korean Christians have stories a lot like Ji's. Although the Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) does provide for freedom of religious belief in Article 68, it specifies that religion cannot "be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order."¹⁷ This caveat nullifies any meaningful right to religious freedom because North Korean leaders consider Christianity to be a foreign threat to the regime.

In 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK released a comprehensive report on North Korean human rights. It argued the regime's grave violations against human rights "reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world."¹⁸ It found that the North Korean regime "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."¹⁹ The North Korean state also recognizes the role Christians and Christian values played in the collapse of communist governments in Poland, the Soviet Union, and Romania. The fear that Christians will similarly undermine communist rule in North Korea makes Christians a particular target for persecution.²⁰

There are exactly five state-sponsored churches allowed to operate in Pyongyang, the capital city. These include three Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and one Russian Orthodox church. Services at these churches may be staged, and it is suspected that these churches may only exist as propaganda pieces for visitors.²¹ Aside from these five churches, there are no formally registered, independent churches in North Korea.

North Korea's social class system continues to present obstacles for the North Korean people, including those of faith. The *songbun* is a unique sociopolitical classification established in the late 1950s that "determines the status of North Korean citizens based largely on their family's history of perceived loyalty to the government."²² Songbun divides the society into three main classes: the "core,"

“wavering,” and “hostile.” There are 56 sub-groups within those three major categories. In the songbun system of 56 sub-classes, Christians and religious adherents have a low status.²³ While the songbun had more influence over the daily lives of North Koreans a few decades ago than it does now, the status it assigns can affect the jobs one may acquire, the education one receives, and one’s access to basic necessities, including food or health care.²⁴

Christians are prohibited from practicing their religion, and those caught doing so are subject to severe punishments.²⁵ Possession of a Bible can be life-threatening. One North Korean defector testified that “many North Korean refugees have Bibles with them when they are repatriated. If they are caught carrying a Bible, they are punished. In North Korea, you can get away with murder if you have good connections. However, if you get caught carrying a Bible, there is no way to save your life.”²⁶

Those who follow Christianity do so at enormous risk and often live out their faith in an isolated manner. Christians must keep their faith a secret, sometimes even from their own families. Christians in North Korea are often isolated from a faith community. They cannot meet with large groups of fellow believers for worship for fear of someone informing the regime. Believers know the cost of getting caught is high. The punishment is often immediate imprisonment in a political prison camp or even execution.²⁷ The UN’s 2014 Commission of Inquiry report found that those discovered to have been in contact with Christian churches “may be forcibly ‘disappeared’ into political prison camps, imprisoned in ordinary prisons or even summarily executed.”²⁸ North Korea punishes crimes to the third generation of the offender, so if the government discovers a Christian, the Christian’s family is often sent to a prison camp as well.²⁹

While Kim Jong Un denies the existence of any prison or labor camps,³⁰ satellite images capture glimpses of large land tracts guarded with towers and barbed wire.³¹ A 2019 U.S. State Department report on North Korean prisons describes two different types of labor camps: the *kwanliso* (kwan-li-so),

or political prison camps, and the *kyohwaso* (kwo-hwa-so), or re-education labor camps.³² Christians, thought to be a foreign threat to the regime's authority, are sent to the kwanliso. The conditions of the kwanliso are known to be extremely dire, with prisoners forced to perform hard labor much of the day and receiving small food rations.³³ These political prison camps are sometimes called "absolute control zones," and prisoners remain there for the rest of their lives. In 2019, it was estimated that of the 80,000 to 120,000 prisoners in the kwanliso, 50,000 were Christians.³⁴ Reports indicate that detainees endure torture, including beatings with electric rods or metal poles, forced submersion in water, and medical experimentation.³⁵

Food scarcity and dire malnutrition often force prisoners to catch rats, frogs, snakes, and other rodents to survive. As many as 2,000 prisoners, mostly children, die from starvation every year in North Korea's prison camps.³⁶ The abuse endured by prisoners is challenging to comprehend. Open Doors USA estimates that North Korean authorities "held 50,000 to 70,000 citizens in prison for being Christians" in 2021 and that "life for Christians... is a constant cauldron of pressure; capture or death is only a mistake away."³⁷

The 2022 State Department Report on International Religious Freedom reported:

International NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and North Korean defectors continued to report that any religious activities unauthorized by the state, including praying, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, could lead to severe punishment, including imprisonment in political prison camps. According to KINU's 2021 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 "acts of superstition" with forced labor, which reportedly could be avoided by bribery.³⁸

Due to the regime's totalitarian, tightly closed nature, it is extremely difficult to attain up-to-date information on what is happening in the country. However, the UK-based NGO Korea Future maintains an impressive database of documented religious freedom violations in North Korea with information provided by North Korean defectors from 1990 to 2019. Thus far, the database has identified 514 victims of religious freedom violations in North Korea and 195 perpetrators.

According to the information gathered by Korea Future, the most common reasons for deprivation of liberty among religious adherents in North Korea are religious practice (Korea Future documented 133 cases), religious activities in China (115), possessing religious items (79), contact with religious persons (72), attending a place of worship (24), sharing religious beliefs (22), and arrest based on informant (19). Although many of the victims Korea Future identified had escaped North Korea to report on what happened, some of the victims were detained in North Korea. North Korea reports in one instance: "The victim was detained in North Pyongan Provincial MSS detention centre with 18 other victims for involvement in an underground church formed by 2 families. The victim was transferred to Chongjin Susong political prison camp."³⁹

North Korea denies religious freedom to its people from the moment they are born, and schoolchildren are even taught to fear religious believers. One propagandist movie shown in North Korean schools, *The Missionary*, shows an American missionary swindling Korean children. According to survivors interviewed for a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) report, schools teach children about the supposed evils of religion and specifically of missionaries. Hong Na Yong, a North Korean defector, told the report's authors, "People even use the word 'missionary' as a curse word." Lee Yong, another defector, said of North Korean schoolchildren, "We do not know who Jesus is, but we are educated to be afraid of the cross."⁴⁰

The trial of Otto Warmbier in 2016, an American student accused of subversion by North Korean authorities after he allegedly took down a propaganda poster on a tour, demonstrates the regime's

paranoia about Christianity. Although Warmbier was Jewish, the court proceedings repeatedly mentioned the offense of Christianity and connected his crime to the influence of a friend from an American Methodist church. The court sentenced Warmbier to 15 years in a labor prison, but he was sent by medical transport to his hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, after only 17 months, where he died days after arriving in the United States.⁴¹

The dangers do not end when one escapes North Korea to China. Most North Korean defectors are young women, and an estimated 60 percent of female defectors in China are trafficked by being sold into marriage to Chinese men or forced into prostitution or cybersex trafficking.⁴²

When caught, Chinese authorities forcibly repatriate defectors and hand them over to North Korean authorities, who interrogate defectors upon their repatriation. North Korean women found to be pregnant with half-Chinese babies endure brutal forced abortions, which often consist of working the women or kicking them to the point of inducing a purposeful miscarriage. Testimonies of female defectors recount forced labor, sexual violence, and abuse upon their repatriation.⁴³

In a 2021 report, Korea Future documented at least 25 cases in which Christian North Korean defectors were caught and repatriated from China. In these cases, Chinese authorities interrogated the defectors about possible Christian affiliation and documented their answers before handing the defectors over to the North Korean agents. If a defector had engaged in Christian activities while in China, the Chinese authorities placed a certain stamp on their files to inform the North Korean agents that they had. The report notes that the presence of these stamps increased the likelihood that these individuals would face brutal punishments.⁴⁴

The journey a North Korean defector must take before finally arriving at freedom is harrowing. The Chinese government's policy of repatriation makes it complicit in North Korea's grotesque human

rights violations. Although the Chinese government is responsible for many other human rights violations, the international community must also give proper attention to the role China plays in North Korea's abuses against repatriated defectors.

Policy Proposals

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) gives the U.S. government several tools with which to address international religious freedom concerns. IRFA established mechanisms such as the Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. State Department, headed by the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, to promote religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. State Department has designated North Korea as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) regarding religious freedom annually since 2001.⁴⁵ To maximize its effectiveness, the U.S. government should continue to use its institutional tools to press North Korea on its human rights issues.

Much of American foreign policy toward North Korea has focused on North Korean denuclearization, relegating human rights to a side issue. However, human rights and national security concerns in North Korea are linked and deserve to be addressed together. Insecurity about the regime's power drives North Korea both to develop nuclear weapons to defend against external threats and to crack down on the rights of any potential dissenters to suppress internal threats to the regime.⁴⁶ U.S. objectives related to security and human rights are complementary, not contradictory.

The Kim regime has proven stubborn and unbending even in the case of strict international sanctions intended to force a compromise. The closed nature of the regime makes standard diplomacy largely impossible. The regime launched more than five missiles over a span of 12 days in July 2023 as part of its testing operation,⁴⁷ showcasing their continued aggression and defiance toward other countries. In such an isolated country, the most effective solutions will likely come from the North Korean people

themselves. However, there are steps the U.S. government can and should take to support the people of North Korea and press the North Korean government to change.

The United States should pursue the following policies to hold the regime to account for its religious freedom violations:

1. Make Human Rights a Central Part of Any Negotiations

The North Korean regime values internal and external security above all else. It is precisely because North Korea's government views these efforts as connected that the United States must also treat the regime's internal actions against its people and external threats to regional security similarly in negotiations.

Many experts have recommended developing a negotiation strategy with North Korea reminiscent of the strategy employed by Western negotiators that led to the Helsinki Accords and relieved tensions between the West and the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ Negotiators should make bold human rights demands and press for a freeze in the development of the North Korean nuclear program. Yet, the conditions under which sanctions against North Korea are lifted or eased must be tied to verifiable improvements in its religious freedom and human rights conditions in accordance with international standards. This is consistent with historic U.S. foreign policy. U.S. sanctions against North Korea have been put in place for several reasons in addition to nuclear proliferation,⁴⁹ including human rights issues⁵⁰ and specifically forced labor allegations.⁵¹ Therefore, the requirements for lifting sanctions should contain measurable steps by the North Korean government to alleviate the dire human rights situation. One specific demand U.S. officials can make of North Korea is the release of all Christians detained for their faith, along with children and families, from prison camps.

Emphasizing human rights demands during the Helsinki negotiations proved valuable in securing an agreement by which the Soviet Union could be called on publicly to adhere to their human rights commitments, encouraging those inside and outside the Soviet Union who advocated for greater freedoms there. A similar agreement with North Korea will empower external activists, particularly those in South Korea, to continue pressing to improve religious freedom and other human rights conditions in the North.

2. Continue to Sanction Officials for Human Rights Violations

The North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 (NKSPEA) requires the designation and sanctioning of individuals who contribute to North Korea's nuclear proliferation or human rights abuses.⁵² Although North Korea remains under a variety of sanctions overall, the United States should not hold back from placing targeted sanctions on North Korean officials suspected of being responsible for human rights violations. Global Magnitsky sanctions can also be utilized against specific North Korean officials known to violate human rights.

4. Pressure China to Stop Repatriating North Korean Defectors

The United States should condemn China's forced repatriation of North Korean defectors. By turning defectors over to North Korean authorities, knowing that they will likely endure brutal punishments in labor camps, the Chinese government is complicit in North Korea's abuses. Along with the governments of like-minded countries, the United States should build international momentum to pressure the Chinese government to cease repatriations to North Korea. The U.S. government can also apply Global Magnitsky sanctions or other targeted sanctions on specific Chinese officials responsible for repatriating defectors.

5. Reauthorize North Korean Human Rights Legislation and Maintain an Ambassador for North Korean Human Rights

USCIRF recommends in its 2023 annual report that Congress reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act.⁵³ The North Korean Human Rights Act, first passed in 2004, highlights the significance North Korean human rights should play in American policy and outlines steps for the United States to pursue in response.⁵⁴ In accordance with Congress' reauthorization requirements, a reauthorization bill introduced by Senators Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Tim Kaine (D-Va.) would renew the legislation until 2027.⁵⁵ The United States should reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act to maintain a U.S. government focus on promoting human rights and religious freedom in North Korea.

Conclusion

Decades of intense strategic efforts to suppress religion and replace it with state-promoted Juche have failed to snuff out religious belief in North Korea. The fact that Christians and others will still choose to practice their faith in North Korea in spite of the dangers is a testament to the importance of religion—and religious freedom—to humanity. The courage of North Korean believers is unparalleled, and their example should motivate those who care about human rights to advocate on their behalf.

As the Biden administration looks to formulate its foreign policy concerning North Korea, human rights must not be relegated to the sidelines. U.S. officials should seek to elevate human rights in its approach to North Korea. To see a changed North Korea that poses no threat to the rest of the world will ultimately require a government that respects its people and allows them to live according to their conscience. The North Korean regime's complex, secretive, and unpredictable nature presents unique challenges to U.S. leaders. However, the U.S. government should take every feasible opportunity to

support the people of North Korea and press the North Korean government to change. The gravity of the situation is itself a call to action.

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