

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2023 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 2022, the UN Secretary-General reported that “the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion [in the DPRK] also continues to be denied, with no alternative belief systems tolerated by the authorities.” Multiple sources indicated the situation had not fundamentally changed since publication of the 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on human rights in the DPRK, which found that authorities almost completely denied the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and determined the government in many instances committed violations of human rights that constituted crimes against humanity. The government reportedly continued to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals for their religious activities. Despite some relaxation beginning in the middle of the year, COVID-19 restrictions on travel to and from the country further reduced information regarding conditions, making details on cases of abuse and estimates involving religious groups difficult to verify. In April, Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported authorities had initiated a nationwide “antisuperstition campaign” targeting a range of “superstitious practices” such as fortune telling.

In a 2021 report, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Korea Future described the government’s denial of religious freedom as absolute and

cited multiple incidents of arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and inhuman treatment, and executions of persons because of their religious belief. Officials principally targeted Christians and followers of Shamanism. Of the 244 victims documented in the report, 150 adhered to Shamanism, 91 adhered to Christianity, one to Cheondoism, and one to other beliefs. NGOs and escapees said the government often arrested or otherwise punished family members of Christians. The NGO Open Doors USA (ODUSA) estimated authorities held 50,000 to 70,000 citizens in prison for being Christian. ODUSA stated that Christians experienced persecution that was “violent and intense” and that “life for Christians ... is a constant cauldron of pressure; capture or death is only a mistake away.” In its annual report, ODUSA cited roundups of Christians from underground churches followed by executions and imprisonments as among the most serious abuses. In an October 2020 white paper, the NGO Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) reported 1,411 cases of religious persecution by authorities, including 126 killings and 94 disappearances, based on reports of escapees from the DPRK between 2007 and July 2020 and other sources. A 2022 report by the International Bar Association stated Christians in detention centers were consistently subjected to more severe and protracted torture than non-Christians, citing numerous examples of severe physical abuse and killings.

A small number of officially registered religious institutions, including churches, existed in the country, particularly in Pyongyang, although according to travelers who were able to visit prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutions operated under tight state control and functioned largely as showpieces for foreigners. The government encouraged all citizens to report anyone engaged in unauthorized religious activity or in possession of religious material. There were reports of private Christian religious activity, although the existence of underground churches and the

scope of underground religious networks remained difficult to quantify. Escapee accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from family members, neighbors, coworkers, and others due to fear of being branded as disloyal and concerns their activities would be reported to authorities. Some defectors and NGOs reported unapproved religious materials were available clandestinely. A Korea Future report in 2022 stated the state ideology of “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism” (adherence to the teachings of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il) had many hallmarks of religion, and the state presents the two leaders as “extraordinary beings” in official materials and authorized texts.

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 regarding abuses, including “in some instances, summary executions of individuals exercising their freedom of opinion and expression, religion or belief.” The U.S. government raised concerns regarding 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 December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanctions 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 26.2 million (midyear 2023). 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 Cheondoism, also known as Cheondogyo, a modern religious movement based on a 19th-century Korean neo-Confucian movement. The government has not reported more recent figures, and outside estimates of the population's religious composition vary, reflecting the severe obstacles faced by outside groups attempting to gather data concerning religion and other sensitive subjects. The Republic of Korea (ROK) and foreign religious groups estimate the number of religious practitioners is considerably higher. 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, or approximately 1-2 percent of the population. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates there are 100,000 Christians, and ODUSA estimates the country has 400,000 Christians. The NKDB reported that among defectors practicing a religion, the majority were Protestant, with a smaller number of Catholics, Buddhists, and others. The UN COI report stated that 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 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, with practitioners in every province, and includes adherents from all levels of society. In his October 2021 report, the previous UN special rapporteur on DPRK 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 “engaging in superstitious activities in exchange for money or goods,” as well as “encouraging others to engage in superstitious activities,” with punishments of up to seven years in a labor camp. 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 law specifically prohibits participation in ‘religious and superstitious activities’ by “young people.”

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

Government Practices

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

There were reports the government continued to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals engaged in almost any religious activities. COVID-19 border restrictions and stringent border security measures resulted in comparatively low numbers of escapees, despite some relaxation beginning in the middle of the year, with the number of North Korean defectors entering the ROK falling from 1,047 in 2019, the last full year prior to the pandemic, to 67 in 2022 and 196 in 2023. Along with the closure of many foreign diplomatic missions during the pandemic and the government’s continued lack of engagement internationally on human rights issues, it remained more difficult than before to gain a comprehensive understanding of conditions within the country and to verify the details of individual cases.

Multiple sources indicated an unchanged situation since publication of the UN Secretary-General’s 2022 report to the UN General Assembly, which stated: “The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion ... continues to be denied, with no alternative belief systems tolerated by the authorities.” The report also noted the continuation of serious human rights violations in places of detention, including the “systematic use of torture

and other forms of ill-treatment.” The report stated, “The increase in the repression of rights and freedoms has been made possible by the constitutional and institutional characteristics of the State, which serve to control the population and centralize power rather than enable the realization of human rights.”

In his 2021 report to the General Assembly, the previous UN special rapporteur on human rights in the DPRK stated that exercise of freedom of religion in the country was “nearly impossible,” and he cited “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, a social classification based on family background and presumed support of the regime, and that Christians are targeted as a “serious threat to loyalty to the state.” Escapees who are repatriated to the country from China are routinely interrogated regarding 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, increased after the government issued an edict in 2017 to root out “superstitious” acts, with anyone violating the law against “superstitious” behavior subject to seven years’ imprisonment and correctional labor.

Multiple sources also stated the situation in the country had not fundamentally changed since publication of the 2014 UN 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, 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.

In May, RFA reported that based on a tip from an informant, authorities had arrested five members of a family in Tongam village outside Sunchon city in South Pyongan Province in the central part of the country who had been gathering early every Sunday morning for secret prayer and Bible study sessions. RFA reported authorities had similarly raided underground churches in the village in 1997 and 2005. In April, RFA reported authorities had initiated a nationwide “antisuperstition campaign” targeting a range of “superstitious practices,” from fortunetelling to “sticking sticky rice cakes” to walls of universities in hopes of being admitted. According to RFA, police in Sinuiju, on the border with China, arrested more than a dozen fortune tellers, with five sentenced to one year in a labor camp and others sentenced to three months of forced labor.

In 2021, 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 abuses. Of these, 150 adhered to Shamanism, 91 adhered to Christianity, one to Cheondoism, and one to other beliefs. The victims ranged in age from two to older than 80. 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. Among specific abuses cited in detention and prison were severely inadequate and contaminated food, periodic

beatings, subjection to remaining in stress positions for extended periods of time, and verbal abuse. The report stated the Ministry of State Security was responsible for 90 percent of documented human rights abuses against both Shamanic adherents and Christians.

The 2023 *Open Doors World Watch List* cited the DPRK for particularly severe religious persecution, conferring on country the worst score possible in five of six categories of religious persecution. According to the report, several dozen religious believers from several underground churches were discovered and executed, and more than 100 family members were sent to labor camps.

A 2022 joint report by the International Bar Association's War Crimes Committee and the Committee for Human rights in North Korea stated Christians in detention centers were consistently subjected to more severe and protracted torture than non-Christians. The report noted "countless examples of individuals arrested and detained for practicing Christianity or even being associated with persons practicing religion." The report noted a defector account that because the punishment for practicing Christianity was so severe, there are credible accounts of individuals keeping their faith even from their own spouses to the point that for years spouses did not know they were both Christian. The report also stated there were widespread incidences of forced abortions of persons charged with crimes due to their religious beliefs.

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 2020. Charges included propagation of religion, possession of religious materials, religious activity, and contact with religious practitioners. The reports indicated that of the

1,411 actions against individual citizens facing such charges, authorities killed 126, caused the disappearance of 94, physically injured 79, deported or forcibly relocated 53, detained 826, restricted movement of 147, and persecuted 86 with other methods of punishment.

According to a white paper on human rights released in May by the ROK government-affiliated Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), the government operated at least five political prison camps. ODUSA estimated the government held 50,000 to 70,000 citizens in prison for being Christians.

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

In an August 2021 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 involved an adherent of Cheondoism. Punishments included arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and denial of life. The report said it found active mobilization of organs of the government to enforce 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, the 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 Social 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. The report stated, however, 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 to life in a prison camp, imposed on up to three generations of the immediate family of the person found guilty. Korea Future reported officials arrested entire families, which in some cases led to the arrest of children as young as two. Investigators also documented incidents in which officials forced the spouses of persons sentenced for religious crimes to divorce them. The 2021 Korea Future 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 criticism or public trials outside the courtroom also served as extrajudicial punishments for religious followers. Mandatory participation of children in these trials and sessions was common.

The report documented multiple cases of physical mistreatment or other cruel treatment, including beatings; forced adoption of 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 beat him with a club and kicked 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 arrested, beat, tortured, and killed members of underground churches because of their religious beliefs. One prisoner who was released in 2020 told RFA that Christians received especially harsh treatment and arbitrary execution. She recounted beatings and inmates being forced to stand for long periods and collapsing.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

In 2019, the NGO HRNK reported the government continued to promote a policy that required all citizens, young and old, to participate in local defense and be willing to mobilize for national defense purposes. The government did not provide exceptions to these requirements or 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 white paper released in May, the DPRK did not allow any ideology or religion other than its *Juche* ideology. The paper stated it was “practically impossible for North Korean people to practice religion.”

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. 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.”

A 2022 Korea Future report focused on the state-sponsored “ideology” (*sasaeng*) of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, highlighting that while DPRK authorities consider it “treacherous” to refer to this doctrine as a “religion” (*chonggyo*), it shares many institutional analogues and common practices with organized religions. These include the dedication of buildings and spaces to serve as “study centers,” which convene regular and mandatory meetings. During such meetings, adherents are expected to intensely study and interpret authorized texts, as well as memorize and recite the teachings of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. Although the ideology makes no explicit claim that the leaders are gods, they are described as “extraordinary beings” capable of supernatural feats. One defector described being taught that bullets fired at Kim Il Sung were always diverted from their course. The defectors interviewed for the study said instructors accompanied this

indoctrination in the official ideology with strong warnings against “superstitious practices,” to mean religious belief.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to a 2020 Korea Future report, the government persecuted members of religious groups on charges such as engaging in religious practices, 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 reports by Christians 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 Protestants were most vulnerable to abuse, followed by adherents of Shamanism, whom government officials subjected to physical mistreatment and 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 2021, 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. Among Christian women, the report documented 140 cases of arbitrary deprivation of liberty, 33 cases of torture, and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; 11 cases of refoulement; five cases of forced labor; and one case of sexual violence including rape. Among Shamanic women, the report 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 Social Security, Ministry of State Security, other DPRK organizations, and the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Public Security. For religious women ages 40 to 60, the reasons cited for abuse 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, 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 brutalization and harassment in the penal system, their trafficking and prostitution across North Korea and

China, their marginalization 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 to indicate whether the campaign continued.

No developments were reported in the cases of three ROK missionaries detained in the country and sentenced to life in prison for “spying and scheming”: Kim Jung-wook, sentenced in 2014; Kim Kuk-gi, sentenced in 2015; or Choi Chun-kil, sentenced in 2015.

According to the NKDB, the constitutional right to freedom of religion 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 2020 by the NKDB found 99.6 percent said that religious activities were not tolerated in the country. Only 2 percent of interviewees said they had visited religious facilities.

The NKDB estimated that as of 2018, there were 121 religious facilities in the country, including 60 Buddhist temples, 52 Cheondoist temples, three Protestant churches, and one Russian Orthodox church, all mostly under state control.

In its 2021 report, KINU stated the government continued to use state-approved religious institutions for “political propaganda” targeted at foreign visitors, with regular citizens strictly barred from entering the facilities, although the report described the situation prior to the prohibition of nearly all cross-border travel at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

At the Bongsu Protestant Church in Pyongyang, according to the report, authorities periodically gathered several hundred “carefully selected” North Koreans to participate in “fake church services” for foreign guests. 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 [Changchung] 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 UN COI report concluded 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 worshiping 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 on suspicion of being secret Christians if authorities observed the individuals lingering outside the churches to listen to the music or the

individuals consistently drove past the churches. 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 prior to border closures in 2020 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.

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, no defectors who testified for the report were aware of the existence of such centers. 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 Cheondoist 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.

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.

The Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity operated in Pyongyang, 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 2021, Russian Orthodox Church officials called the church “a priceless gift of the DPRK state leadership to Russian Orthodox Christians residing in Pyongyang” but made no mention of North Koreans worshipping there.

The NKDB stated officials conducted thorough searches of incoming packages and belongings at ports, customs checkpoints, and airports for religious items, as well as for 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, officials taught children antireligious views beginning in kindergarten, 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 the textbooks claimed included rape, blood sucking, organ harvesting, murder, and espionage. One defector told Korea Future the government published graphic novels in which Christians coaxed children into churches and then took them to the basement to draw their blood.

Transnational Repression

In October, UN officials, NGOs, and foreign governments expressed grave concern regarding reports the PRC had forcibly repatriated hundreds of North Koreans, including defectors, to the DPRK, where they were vulnerable to harsh punishment, including torture, forced labor, sexual abuse, and summary executions. Such repatriations had been largely suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. NGOs, defectors, media, and UN officials previously reported authorities subjected repatriated individuals suspected of contact with Christian groups abroad to enhanced scrutiny and punishment.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

According to KINU, religion continued to be used to justify restricting individuals to the lowest class rungs of the songbun system, a social classification based on 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 the government perceived religious persons and their families to be “antirevolutionary elements.”

According to KINU’s 2021 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 that authorities continued to educate citizens at least twice a year in ways to detect individuals spreading Christianity. The report noted that punishments for defectors who were forcibly returned to the country were harsher for those who were in contact with Christians in the PRC.

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 these groups were involved in intelligence gathering. Although the government began in midyear to relax the controls it first imposed in 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19, cross-border travel restrictions continued to hinder relief and assistance activities.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

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 UN 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, including an absolute monopoly on information and total control over organized social life, further tightened by the COVID-19 prevention measures, 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 humanitarian situation and the adverse impact on the human rights situation in the [DPRK] of disproportionate and unnecessary measures taken 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

In August, the Security Council held an open session on North Korean human rights issues for the first time since 2017. Speakers included UN representatives and North Korean defectors who described the continued widescale violations and abuses of human rights by authorities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Due to the country’s inaccessibility, little was known about day-to-day societal interactions of individuals practicing religion. Continued travel restrictions during and resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and low numbers of defectors compared to the prepandemic period exacerbated this inaccessibility.

The 2014 UN 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 a network of neighborhood informers. It stated, "Children 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 adherents remained careful when teaching Christian beliefs due to fear of being reported, even within their own families. 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 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 donations from 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. 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 percent, had practiced religion in secret, and nine, or 6.1 percent, had witnessed others secretly practicing religion. The latter figure in 2018 had been only 1.8 percent. NKDB also stated 7.6 percent of defectors in 2019 said they had “seen a Bible” before fleeing the country. The report concluded that although the government continued to severely restrict religion, exposure to religion appeared to be gradually increasing.

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. Another 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.

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 the December resolution passed by the UN General Assembly that condemned the country's "long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights," and expressed very serious concern regarding abuses, including "in some instances summary executions of individuals exercising their freedom of opinion and expression, religion or belief." The resolution also noted "all-pervasive" restrictions on the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. In August, in concert with Albania, Japan, and the ROK, the United States also helped convene the first UN Security Council open session on DPRK human rights issues since 2017.

The U.S. government raised concerns regarding religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the DPRK. This included increased bilateral cooperation with the ROK on DPRK human rights issues, as well as a November meeting of like-minded countries to coordinate actions and discuss the DPRK's human rights record. 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 December 29, 2023, 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.