

# NORTH KOREA

## TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

The North Korean government's approach toward religion and belief is among the most hostile and repressive in the world. Freedom of religion or belief does not exist in North Korea. The regime exerts absolute influence over the handful of state-controlled houses of worship permitted to exist, creating a facade of religious life in North Korea. In practice, the North Korean regime treats religion as a threat, particularly faiths associated with the West, such as Christianity, and is known to arrest, torture, imprison, and even execute religious believers. Although it is challenging to obtain information about violations of religious freedom occurring in North Korea, defector accounts and the work of advocacy

and nongovernmental organizations increasingly reveal the regime's abuses and reinforce the international community's entreaties for accountability. In the meantime, throughout 2017 the North Korean government perpetuated its long-standing record of systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, and USCIRF again finds that North Korea, also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), merits designation in 2018 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State repeatedly has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001, most recently in December 2017.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing trade restrictions pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016, the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act, and other executive, congressional, or United Nations (UN) action;
- Identify and target—with sanctions or other tools—individuals or companies outside North Korea who work directly with North Korean human rights violators or benefit from these abuses;
- Call for a follow-up UN inquiry to track the findings of the [2014 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#) (COI) and assess any new developments—particularly with respect to violations of the freedom of religion or belief—and suggest a regularization of such analysis similar to and in coordination with the Universal Periodic Review process;
- Maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean human rights issues as a full-time position at the State Department and ensure that religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Include, whenever possible, both the Special Envoy and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in official and unofficial discussions about or with North Korea in order to incorporate human rights and religious freedom into the dialogue, and likewise incorporate human rights and religious freedom concerns into discussions with multilateral partners regarding denuclearization and security, as appropriate;
- Strengthen cooperation with regional partners, particularly Japan and South Korea, to raise human rights and humanitarian concerns, including specific religious freedom issues, and press for improvements, including the release of prisoners of conscience and closure of the infamous political prisoner camps and other detention facilities;
- Expand existing radio programming transmitted into North Korea and along the border, as well as the dissemination of other forms of information technology, such as mobile phones, thumb drives, and DVDs, and facilitation of improved internet access so North Koreans have greater access to independent sources of information; and
- Encourage Chinese support for addressing the most egregious human rights violations in North Korea, including violations of religious freedom, and regularly raise with the government of China the need to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum-seekers in China, including by allowing the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and international humanitarian organizations to assist them, and by ending repatriations, which are in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol and/or the UN Convention against Torture.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Cosponsor and reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2017 ([H.R. 2061/S. 1118](#)) and incorporate updated language and/or recommendations from the 2014 COI report, particularly regarding freedom of religion or belief.

## COUNTRY FACTS

### FULL NAME

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

### GOVERNMENT

Single-party state; official state ideology of "*Juche*" or "national self-reliance"

### POPULATION

25,248,000+

### GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Government-sponsored religious groups (e.g., the Korean Religious Practitioners Association, the Korean Christian Federation, the Korean Buddhist Federation, the Korean Catholic Association, the Korean Chondokyo Central

Committee, and the Korean Orthodox Committee) exist to provide the illusion of religious freedom

### RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY\*

(NOTE: figures are outdated and difficult to confirm)  
<1% Christian

### OTHER GROUPS

Historical traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism, as well as Chondoism (also spelled Cheondoism), a local religious movement

\*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook, the U.S. Department of State, and the Korea Institute for National Unification

## BACKGROUND

Current North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inherited his cult of personality from his father and grandfather, who crafted a cult-like ideology known as *Juche*, which translates into a communist-like style of governance. All citizens are required to be unfailingly loyal; as a result, deifying the Kim family and the state has become a religion unto itself. Those who follow a religion or belief do so at great risk and typically in secret, at times even keeping their faith hidden from their own families in an attempt to protect them from being accused of "guilt by association" and sent to one of North Korea's notorious political prison camps. Authorities apply such collective punishment to family members of individuals suspected of religious or political activities. In addition to abuses prisoners experience, the overall human rights situation in North Korea remains bleak, including reports of malnutrition; limited freedom of movement, expression, and access to information; sexual assault; forced labor and enslavement; and enforced disappearances. North Korea's human rights violations occur in the context of its increasingly aggressive nuclear posturing, such as several missile launches during 2017 and its

sixth known underground nuclear test, which involved a hydrogen bomb, according to the regime's claims.

Throughout 2017, the UN continued to address human rights abuses in North Korea. In February 2017, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK issued a report to the UN Human Rights Council; in March, the Council renewed the Special Rapporteur's mandate for one year. Also in March, the Council adopted a resolution strengthening the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' office in Seoul, South Korea, to include experts on legal accountability for human rights violations. In May 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities visited the country—the first-ever visit to North Korea by a UN Human Rights Council-designated independent expert.

In 2017, the UN Security Council met several times in response to North Korea's missile tests, including a December 2017 meeting requested by the United States and eight other Member States to discuss North Korea's human rights abuses; representatives from Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine all mentioned religious freedom in their remarks.

Defectors are an important source of information about the North Korean regime's abuses. In 2017, former North Korean diplomat Thae Yong-ho testified before the U.S. Congress about his 2016 defection to South Korea, and in an interview with the National Endowment for Democracy stated that "North Korean society can only be maintained in a way that Kim Jong-un is depicted and is respected like a god by the popular masses." According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, between January and September 2017, a total of 881 North Korean defectors entered into South Korea, the overwhelming majority of whom were women. However, South Korean officials anticipated fewer total defections in 2017 than in previous years, in part because of increased government monitoring and tighter border controls between North Korea and China.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017 Government Control and Repression of Christianity

All religious groups are prohibited from conducting religious activities except through the handful of state-controlled houses of worship, and even these activities are tightly controlled and largely manufactured for the benefit of foreign audiences.

(There are three Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church.) Underground churches do exist in North Korea, but

information about their location and number of parishioners is nearly impossible to confirm. According to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, individuals face persecution for propagating religion, possessing religious items, carrying out religious activities (including praying and singing hymns), and having contact with religious persons. For example, in June 2017, North Korean authorities arrested Kim Seung-mo and charged him with spying after learning he had come into contact with Christian family members and others during a visit to China. According to the State Department, the North Korean regime currently detains an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 individuals in political prison camps known as *kwanliso*, though there are other types of facilities where authorities detain individuals. Reports indicate that tens of thousands

of prisoners facing hard labor or execution are Christians from underground churches or who practice in secret.

The North Korean regime reviles Christianity and considers it the biggest threat among religions; the regime associates Christianity with the West, particularly the United States. Through robust surveillance, the regime actively tries to identify and seek out Christians practicing their faith in secret and imprisons those it apprehends, often along with their family members even if they are not similarly religious. In May 2017, some Christian defectors informed USCIRF about their life in North Korea. One defector explained that there is only one religion in North Korea: the worship of leader Kim Jong-un. Still, the defector depicted the Gospel as a lifeline for many North Korean Christians, especially in an environment in which they, in his words, "do not have a right to think" and are "forced to live in a certain way."

In December 2017, the War Crimes Committee of the International Bar Association issued a report about crimes against humanity in North Korea's political prisons. The report noted that "Christians are heavily persecuted and receive especially harsh treatment in prison camps"; prisoners are "tortured and killed on account of their religious affiliation" or for participating

in Christian meetings, reading the Bible, or encountering Christianity outside North Korea; and "Christians (or those suspected of being Christians) [are] incarcerated

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in specific zones within the prison camp at which prisoners were subjected to more severe deprivation." The report also revealed that one of the reasons North Korea created political prisons in the 1950s was to eliminate so-called "enemies of the party and state," a vague grouping that includes religious followers.

In rare positive news, in August 2017, North Korean authorities released Pastor Hyeon Soo Lim, a South Korean-born Canadian citizen sentenced in December 2015 to life in prison with hard labor for alleged subversive activities and insulting North Korea's leadership. Authorities released Reverend Lim on humanitarian grounds after he reportedly was hospitalized during his imprisonment. A high-level Canadian delegation visiting North Korea—with the assistance of the Swedish

Embassy—helped secure Reverend Lim’s release after he spent two and a half years in a labor camp.

### North Korean Refugees in China

North Korean defectors who flee to and remain in China live a life of constant risk, and many times fall prey to economic and/or sexual exploitation. In recent years, North Korean officials have collaborated with their Chinese counterparts to fortify border areas frequented by North Koreans attempting to flee, and they increasingly target groups who work to assist the refugees. These efforts, along with China’s inhospitable attitude toward asylum-seekers, create additional peril

for individuals believed to have interacted with missionaries or engaged in religious activities. When USCIRF met with North Korean defectors in 2017, they confirmed reports that individuals who flee to China and whom the Chi-

nese government forcibly repatriates to North Korea are treated more harshly upon their return if they are believed to be Christians or came into contact with Christianity in China. China’s forcible repatriation of North Koreans attempting to cross into China violates its obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

### U.S. POLICY

Throughout 2017, the U.S. government attempted to recalibrate its approach to North Korea, including taking strong positions at the UN and making efforts to encourage regional partners, particularly China, to increase pressure on the regime. In April 2017, President Donald Trump’s Administration announced a new North Korea policy, “Maximum Pressure and Engagement,” which signaled an openness to dialogue while still using strong rhetoric and sanctions. Some analysts have noted that the new policy, in practice, does not differ significantly from previous administrations’ policies. On April 28, 2017, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson chaired a meeting of the UN Security Council about enforcing sanctions against North Korea; while his [remarks](#) did not specifically mention religious freedom, he stated that “helping the North Korean regime means enabling

cruelty and suffering,” and he asked other countries to “help us preserve security and protect human dignity.” In May 2017, the United States, represented by then Secretary Tillerson, hosted foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for a discussion about North Korea.

In addition to multilateral efforts in 2017, the administration also took steps to underscore human rights and related concerns with the North Korean regime. In August 2017, the State Department issued a [fact sheet](#) that revealed evidence of starvation, malnutrition, forced labor, and torture in six North Korean

political prison camps. On September 1, 2017, the State Department implemented a travel ban on U.S. citizens traveling to, in, or through North Korea, allowing only those who obtain a one-time-use special passport to travel. Later in September,

the Treasury Department named eight North Korean banks and 26 North Korean banking officials who live abroad in a new round of sanctions aimed at those who facilitate North Korea’s weapons programs.

In October 2017, the State Department released its third [report](#) on North Korea’s human rights abuses and censorship pursuant to the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-122). The report added seven individuals and three state entities to the list of those responsible for human rights violations and censorship; in total, the three reports have named 42 individuals and entities, including North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. None of the reports specifically mention religious freedom, though in statements for all three reports, the State Department characterized human rights abuses in North Korea as “among the worst in the world.” President Trump noted the North Korean regime’s suppression of religion during his November 7 [remarks](#) at the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), stating that “Christians and other people of faith who are found praying or holding a religious book of any kind are now detained, tortured, and in many cases, even executed.” Also in November, the United States returned North Korea

*. . . individuals who flee to China and whom the Chinese government forcibly repatriates to North Korea are treated more harshly upon their return if they are believed to be Christians or came into contact with Christianity in China.*

to the [list](#) of State Sponsors of Terrorism and imposed sanctions on a Chinese businessman and Chinese trading companies doing business with North Korea and on North Korean shipping and trading companies and vessels. The United States sanctioned two more North Korean officials in December 2017 for their role in that country's missile program.

North Korea continues to target individuals with close ties to the United States; the regime routinely detains them and compels confessions, using them as pawns in an effort designed to embarrass and undermine the United States. In 2017, North Korean authorities arrested two U.S. citizens, both of whom were teachers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. Authorities accused both men, Kim Hak-Song and Kim Sang-Duk (also known as Tony Kim), of alleged "hostile acts." They join Kim Dong-chul, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in South Korea, whom North Korea's Supreme Court sentenced in 2016 to 10 years of hard labor on charges of alleged spying. Another U.S. prisoner was Otto Warmbier, who died in June 2017 after North Korean officials released him from prison on humanitarian grounds. Warmbier was serving 15 years of hard labor for allegedly committing a "hostile act" when he tore down a political banner from a Pyongyang hotel. Ambassador Joseph Y. Yun, the Special Representative for North Korea Policy, held several talks with North Korean officials to advocate for the young man's release and traveled to North Korea to accompany the medical team that returned Warmbier to the United States. Following Warmbier's passing, a State Department spokesperson expressed condolences and called for release of the other three Americans, whom Ambassador Yun reportedly met in person during his trip to Pyongyang.

The State Department last redesignated North Korea as a CPC in December 2017. In lieu of prescribing sanctions specific to the CPC designation, the State Department consistently has applied "double-hatted" sanctions against North Korea, in this case extending restrictions under the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of the Trade Act of 1974. Jackson-Vanik originated when Congress sought to pressure Communist countries for their human rights violations, and has since been used to restrict trade with countries like North Korea.