

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

U.S. Policy and Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea

Prepared statement Inje Hwang, Investigator at Korea Future

Thank you for giving me the chance to speak for Korea Future as the investigator who worked on the recent investigation project on North Korea's religious freedom.

I would like to share with you an effective summary of the findings of the investigation. Korea Future's 2022 investigation establishes the source of religious freedom violations in North Korea as the ideology known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, which is universally enforced within North Korea by the ruling Workers' Party of Korea. An understanding of how and why this is implemented across state and society can aid the deterrence of perpetrators, the pursuit of accountability and justice, and policies designed to prevent future atrocities.

In Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, an individual strives to follow the guidance of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in both the internal and external aspects of life. It is not a new ideology, as it was first announced as Kimilsungism by Kim Jong Il in 1974, when the Ten Principles, the central tenets of the ideology, were released. It became known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism following the death of Kim Jong Il.

While commonly ridiculed in Western media, North Korea's monolithic ideology is the vehicle by which the North Korean citizens' freedom to choose between Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and other religions or beliefs is eradicated. Essentially, it is the tool for denying the North Korean peoples' freedom of religion and belief. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism makes no explicit claim that the Kims are gods. Rather, they are presented as extraordinary beings possessing superhuman abilities, and those who spearheaded the technological breakthroughs of the nation and safeguards its future.

It is important to remember that adherence to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism entails the renunciation of all other systems of religion or belief, creating an effective zero-sum relationship between the party ideology and religious freedom. Subscription to alternative ideals is regarded as an act of treason to both the modus operandi and the founding ideals of the state. The party teaches the people must completely devote themselves to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and any investment in alternative ideology or beliefs are regarded as deviations from the monolithic ideology of the state. Adherence to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is a requirement for students in compulsory education. The content is taught in age-appropriate methods. For example, kindergarten students learn the heroic deeds of Kim Il Sung as a child through vivid story telling using a scale model of the supreme leader's childhood home. Study of the supreme leader's achievements and teachings are considered as a core academic subject, and all university admission exams include the assessment of a student's proficiency in its content.

Ongoing assessments of students' ideological adherence starts in elementary school and continues until their high school matriculations. The permanent records of the assessment greatly influences a student's college admission results and future employment possibilities.

Indoctrination on the accomplishments of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il continues into adulthood. Trained party officials serve as instructors who oversee the weekly learning sessions in all government organizations including law enforcement branches. These lectures are held in dedicated spaces known as "study centers," a structure dedicated to the study of the supreme leader's words and achievements. Despite the diversity in their architecture, all study centers contain pictorial representations of memorable scenes from the supreme leader's life and gypsum busts of past supreme leaders.

The Workers' Party employs a series of coercion mechanisms to proactively encourage compliance to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism of the population while discouraging all acts of deviation from the monolithic ideology. For example, North Korean state's use of a hereditary caste system, known as songbun, to implement policies of discrimination has been well documented by past researchers. As individual castes in the songbun system are based in part on judgments of the ideological and political loyalty, it is unsurprising that they are considered in job assignments directly involved in the administration of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. All party members undergo background songbun checks and assessments of individual loyalty to the monolithic ideology as a part of their cadre assignment evaluations.

Ideological assessments are also required for work in technocratic fields such as engineering and medicine. It was explained that as doctors and engineers are in a position to supervise and influence many people, they have to be totally ideologically aligned. Exclusion from career opportunities, however, is not the only tool that the Workers' Party employs in order to ensure the ideological compliance of the North Korean people. Both law enforcement and civilian organizations enforce penal sanctions on individuals accused of ideological deviance. Individuals may be publicly prosecuted and sentenced for engaging in common Shamanic practice by the Ministry of People's Security or the police force of the nation or be secretly prosecuted and sentenced by the Ministry of State Security for links to Christianity. Korea Future's investigations have revealed that religious adherence was subjected to severe human rights violations such as arbitrary detention or unfair trials, torture, forced labor, and even summary executions as punishment for deviating from the party's ideology.

In conclusion, it is important for the audience today to understand that Kimilsungism - Kimjongilism requires its followers to not only reject other systems of religion or belief, but also to persecute or destroy other systems of religion or belief in North Korean society. Anyone who is not an avid, proactive participant of the propaganda regimen, consisting of both education and coercion methods, are ostracized and penalized, whereas those who openly display their loyalty to the party's ideology are handsomely rewarded. Any attempt at dismantling the Workers' Party's systematic violation of freedom of religion and belief must take into account the holistic nature of its approach and to recognize the effective countermeasures would entail a combination of cultural and political intervention from outside sources. Once again, thanks for giving me this chance to speak.