

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in North Korea remained among the worst in the world. North Korea’s ruling ideology, known as [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism](#), forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat. The country’s most fundamental legal document, known as the [Ten Principles](#) for the Establishment of a Monolithic Leadership System, requires absolute loyalty and obedience to the teachings of North Korean leaders. The Ten Principles contradict the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law and in the country’s own [constitution](#), which nominally grants religious freedom. The ruling Workers’ Party of Korea actively enforces the Ten Principles at all levels of government and across society, monitors and controls religious belief and activities, and systematically denies North Korean citizens the right to religious freedom.

North Korea’s discriminatory [songbun](#) system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state. Religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class and are considered enemies of the state, deserving “discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution.” The government attempts to [provide](#) an illusion of religious freedom to the outside world through state-controlled religious sites and organizations, which include the Korean Buddhist Federation, the Korean Christian Federation, and the Korean Catholic Association. In reality, religious freedom remains nonexistent as authorities actively and systematically target and [persecute](#)

religious groups and adherents, including Christians, practitioners of shamanism, and others.

Protestant Christians remain especially vulnerable to persecution. According to a 2022 [report](#) by the War Crimes Committee of the International Bar Association and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, human rights abuses—including religious freedom abuses—in North Korean detention centers amount to crimes against humanity. Christians make up a disproportionate number of detainees in these detention centers. Authorities consider the practice of their faith a political crime and levy particularly harsh punishments on prisoners from that community, including severe torture and killing. For example, a former detainee at the Onsong labor detention center estimated that between 50 and 60 percent of the facility’s population are Christian or have had contact with Christianity. The Ministry of State Security, North Korea’s secret police agency, is the principal perpetrator responsible for the persecution of Christians.

Furthermore, North Korean law [bans](#) shamanistic practices as “superstitious acts.” The Ministry of People’s Security, North Korea’s police agency, is primarily responsible for abuses against practitioners of shamanism. Information on religious freedom conditions for practitioners of other major religious traditions in North Korea—such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondoism—remains severely limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in broader U.S. policy toward—and in bilateral negotiations with—North Korea; and
- Impose targeted and broad sanctions—including coordinated, multilateral sanctions with international partners—as appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea and consider lifting certain sanctions in return for concrete progress in religious freedom and related human rights.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act and swiftly confirm the nominee for Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the Right to Freedom of Religion, Thought, and Conscience in North Korea](#)
- **Hearing:** [U.S. Policy and Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea](#)

Background

Information about religious demographics and religious freedom conditions in North Korea is difficult to confirm and often outdated. Historically, North Koreans followed Buddhism and an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way). The country was also home to a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War (1950–1953), with Pyongyang known as the “Jerusalem of the East,” but successive crackdowns have shrunk the Christian population to an estimated [two percent](#) of the total population. Shamanism and traditional folk religion practices, such as fortunetelling, are also prevalent.

North Korean Defectors and Refugees

Defectors and refugees from North Korea are primary sources of information about religious freedom conditions in the country. In recent years, however, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea has decreased significantly due to tightened security along borders between China and North Korea as well as between China and Southeast Asian countries; the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a further decrease. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, only 67 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea in 2022—one of the lowest numbers in over 20 years. The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and repatriates them if discovered, without regard to their risk of persecution upon return, in violation of its international obligations. North Korean refugees who have contact with Christian missionaries and nongovernmental organization workers in China face severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea. Chinese authorities have expelled hundreds of South Korean missionaries since 2017, many of whom played an instrumental role in helping North Korean refugees escape.

International Accountability in the United Nations (UN)

In March, Tomás Ojea Quintana, then Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, [submitted](#) a report to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) raising concerns about North Korea’s deprivation of its people’s fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression, religion, and thought. It [recommended](#) that North Korea “review the Law on the Elimination of Reactionary Thought and Culture, and promote and protect freedom of expression, access to information and freedom of religion, including for young people.” In August, the UNHRC [appointed](#) Elizabeth Salmón of Peru as the incoming Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

In April, the UNHRC adopted a [resolution](#) condemning “[long-standing] and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations and other human rights abuses committed” in North Korea. It expressed grave concerns over North Korea’s persecution of individuals on religious and other grounds; denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to adopt a religion or belief; and discrimination based on the *songbun* system. The UNHRC also called on the North Korean government to ensure the right to thought, conscience, and religion or belief. In December, the UN General Assembly [passed](#) a resolution expressing concerns over North Korea’s dire human rights conditions and calling for international efforts to improve them.

Key U.S. Policy

There was little to no change in U.S.-North Korea relations in 2022. Officials with the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [repeated](#) the U.S. [commitment](#) to diplomacy and dialogue with North Korea, without preconditions, to which the North Korean government [offered](#) no positive response. During President Biden’s visit with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in May, the two leaders [issued](#) a joint statement that expressed grave concern over the human rights situation in North Korea. In December, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, and their Australian counterparts issued a joint statement during the U.S.-Australia Ministerial Consultations that [called on](#) North Korea to engage in denuclearization dialogue, while [expressing](#) grave concern over severe human rights violations in that country.

On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action the existing, ongoing restrictions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974. That same month, pursuant to Executive Order 13687, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) North Korea’s Ministry of State Security Border Guard General Bureau (BGGB) for its complicity in human rights abuses along that country’s borders with China and Russia. On January 23, 2023, shortly after the reporting period, President Biden [nominated](#) Julie Turner for the position of Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues.

In March, Representative Young Kim (R-CA) and Representative Ami Bera (D-CA) [introduced](#) in the U.S. House of Representatives a bipartisan bill to reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act ([H.R.7332](#)), but the House took no further action on the measure. In May, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) [introduced](#) the Senate version of the bill ([S.4216](#)), which the Senate passed in December. As the law [expired](#) at the end of fiscal year 2022 and was not reauthorized by the conclusion of the 117th Congress (January 2021–January 2023), members of the House and Senate are likely to reintroduce new versions.