

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

North Korea remained one of the worst religious freedom violators in the world in 2024. The overarching ideological and enforcement framework for repressing any exercise of religious freedom remained in force. North Korea's ruling ideology, known as [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism](#), considers former leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as extraordinary beings whose guidance all North Koreans must follow in all aspects of life. It furthermore forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat to the country. North Korea'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 and contradicts the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law. 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 freedom of religion or belief.

North Korea's discriminatory *songbun* system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state, with religious practitioners belonging to the system's lowest rung, or "hostile" class. The government views Protestant Christians as "collaborators of imperialistic forces and enemies of the nation and revolution," in addition to members of the "hostile" class. Simply possessing a

Bible, interacting with Christian missionaries, or engaging in worship can lead to severe punishment, including torture, forced labor, imprisonment, and execution.

An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 individuals, many of whom are Christian, are detained in North Korea's prisons. In 2024, authorities continued to imprison South Korean Christian missionaries [Kim Jung-wook](#), [Kim Kook-kie](#), and [Choi Chun-gil](#)—who have each spent more than a decade behind bars—over their religious engagement with North Koreans. In its 2024 World Watch List, the nongovernmental organization Open Doors ranked North Korea as the country where Christians faced the most extreme persecution.

The government has intensified persecution of North Korean citizens who practice "superstitious activities" such as shamanism and fortunetelling, which it classifies as "unsocialist behaviors." According to a 2024 South Korean government report, North Korea's 619 investigation task force (*grouppa*) has been responsible for enforcing the government's intensified crackdown on superstitious activities, with practitioners receiving harsh sentences including forced labor, imprisonment, and even public execution in recent years. Information on religious freedom conditions for practitioners of other religious traditions in North Korea—such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondism—remained 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);
- 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 on religious freedom and related human rights;
- Maintain and fill the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights issues as a full-time position at the U.S. Department of State and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in broader U.S. policy toward North Korea as well as in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with North Korea; and
- Coordinate closely with South Korea to offer protections and/or safe passage of North Korean refugees persecuted on the basis of religion.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act and urge the administration of President Donald J. Trump to appoint a special envoy for North Korean human rights issues.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Delegation Travels to South Korea to Investigate Religious Freedom in North Korea](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in North Korea and North Korean Refugees: Trends and U.S. Policy Options](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) the population of North Korea at 26.2 million, with the exact number of religious adherents difficult to ascertain due to outdated information. Historically, North Koreans followed Buddhism and Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way). Shamanism and traditional folk religious practices, such as fortunetelling, are also prevalent. The country was home to a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War (1950–1953), but successive crackdowns have shrunk the Christian population to an estimated two percent of the total population.

While North Korea's constitution purports to guarantee freedom of religion, escapees reported that the government does not tolerate religious activities in the country. Authorities maintain several state-controlled religious organizations and manage a limited number of houses of worship for propaganda purposes.

North Korean Defectors and Refugees

North Korea remained one of the world's most repressive and isolated countries in 2024, making documenting religious freedom violations challenging. Most information about North Korea comes from North Korean refugees who have escaped the country. However, North Korea's harsh border policies following the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in significantly fewer North Koreans leaving the country, thus further limiting information. According to the South Korean government, only 181 North Koreans defected to South Korea in 2024—one of the lowest numbers in nearly three decades.

China continued to play a major role in facilitating North Korea's gross violations of religious freedom and related human rights. The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as unlawful economic migrants and repatriates them if caught in China while attempting to defect to South Korea, disregarding their risk of persecution upon return and violating the international principle of non-refoulement. North Korean refugees in China who engage in religious activities and have contact with Christian missionaries and nongovernmental organization workers face severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea. China reportedly uses advanced surveillance technology, such as facial recognition devices, and collects North Koreans' biometric data to prevent their escape.

International Attention

The international community repeatedly highlighted North Korea's human rights situation in 2024 and called for accountability for gross violations. In April, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) [adopted](#) a resolution requesting the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to prepare a comprehensive report on the human rights situation in North Korea following the UN Commission of Inquiry's (COI) 2014 report. The COI report [concluded](#) at the time that "there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" in North Korea. The April resolution also called on member states to respect

the principle of non-refoulement and counter North Korea's efforts at transnational repression.

In June, the UN Security Council [discussed](#) the human rights [situation](#) in North Korea, where UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk [outlined](#) several major concerns. In July, the OHCHR [concluded](#) that North Korea's use of forced labor in detention could amount to crimes against humanity and that North Koreans of a lower *songbun* level were at greater risk of more severe forms of forced labor. In November, the UN Human Rights Council [conducted](#) its [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) of North Korea. UN member states [urged](#) North Korea to allow UN Special Procedures and other UN bodies to visit the country; release all prisoners of conscience, including Kim Jung-wook, Kim Kook-kie, and Choi Chun-gil; end forced labor and torture; implement the COI's 2014 recommendations; and stop persecuting religious groups, including through the *songbun* system. In December, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution on North Korea's human rights situation, urging North Korea to guarantee freedom of religion, among other concerns.

Key U.S. Policy

Although the United States has no diplomatic [relations](#) with North Korea, the U.S. government continued to take steps in 2024 to address that country's appalling human rights record. Then Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues Julie Turner visited [South Korea](#) and other [countries](#) throughout the year to shore up support for efforts to monitor and seek accountability for North Korea's human rights violations. In February, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden [called](#) on North Korea and other states to implement the COI report's recommendations.

In April, the United States and South Korea held [consultations](#) to identify strategies to promote North Koreans' fundamental freedoms and dignity. In October, U.S., South Korean, and Japanese government officials [held](#) the Trilateral Meeting on Human Rights in North Korea, urging the UN to promote accountability for North Korea's human rights violations. The State Department subsequently [announced](#) programming to assist those working on North Koreans' human rights.

During North Korea's UPR, the United States called for a dismantling of the country's political prison camps and the release of prisoners of conscience, among other recommendations. The State Department [continued](#) to [advocate](#) for the [release](#) of Kim Jung-wook, Kim Kook-kie, and Choi Chun-gil. The United States also [engaged](#) with China to address its refoulement of North Korean refugees.

In November, the House of Representatives [passed](#) the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act ([H.R. 3012](#)), which would reauthorize activities to promote human rights in North Korea. The Senate, however, did not vote on the legislation by the conclusion of the 118th Congress (January 2023–January 2025).

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.