

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, North Korea continued to be one of the worst violators of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the world. Organized religion in North Korea has reportedly been almost entirely eliminated. The Ministry of State Security counterintelligence departments treat religious activity as an “anti-state crime” and have intensified crackdowns against suspected religious activity since the enactment of the Youth Education Guarantee Act in 2021, particularly along North Korea’s borders and among North Korean youth. Authorities have continued to intensify punishment against “superstitious activities” such as traditional shamanistic practices, and information on the state of other religious traditions in North Korea such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondoism remains severely limited.

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 forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat to the Kim regime. 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 Korean Workers’ Party actively enforces the Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology at all levels of government and across society, monitors and controls religious belief and activities, and systematically denies North Korean citizens the right to FoRB.

North Korea’s discriminatory *songbun* system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state, with religious practitioners and proselytizers belonging to the system’s lowest level, or “hostile” class. The government views Protestant Christians as “collaborators of imperialistic forces and enemies of the nation and revolution.” Possessing a Bible, interacting with Christian missionaries while escaping North Korea, 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 and labor camps. In 2025, North Korean authorities continued to imprison South Korean Christian missionaries [Kim Jung-wook](#), [Choi Chung-il](#), and [Kim Kook-kie](#), who have been held in North Korea for over a decade. In November, [Deacon Zhang Wen Shi](#) was released from prison and returned to China after serving 12 years of a 15-year sentence.

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 FoRB, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted and broad sanctions through the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control—in coordination with the U.S. Department of State—and multilateral sanctions with international partners as appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea;
- Maintain and fill the position of special envoy for North Korean human rights issues as a full-time position at the State Department and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Coordinate closely with South Korea to secure the release of prisoners of conscience held in North Korea and to offer protections and safe passage for North Korean refugees persecuted on the basis of religion; and
- Raise in engagements with China that North Korean refugees should not be repatriated to North Korea, particularly if refugees have encountered religious organizations or individuals within China.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass legislation focused on human rights and religious freedom that supports civil society and independent media documenting religious freedom violations, including the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2025. ([H.R. 5959](#)).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [The Degrading Freedom of Religion or Belief Conditions in North Korea](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

The U.S. government estimates that 26.3 million people live within North Korea. Decades of state-directed oppression against religious practices has led to the near elimination of organized religion in North Korea. By one estimate, there were up to 400,000 underground Christians in North Korea in 2025. As North Korea is one of the most repressive and isolated countries in the world, estimating the number of remaining religious adherents is challenging. Prior to the Korean War (1950–1953), Pyongyang for a time was called the “Jerusalem of the East” for its thriving Christian community. According to North Korea’s own reporting in 1950, 23.7 percent of North Koreans adhered to Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, or Chondoism. The Korean Peninsula also has a long history of shamanism and other native Korean traditions. North Korean figures presented to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee in August 2002 stated that 0.16 percent of the North Korean population practiced Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, or Chondoism.

North Korea’s constitution purports to guarantee freedom of religion, but escapees have reported that the government does not tolerate religious activities in the country. Authorities maintain state-controlled organizations that it claims are religious as well as a limited number of houses of worship for propaganda purposes when engaging international audiences.

North Korean Defectors and Escapees

The primary source of information on violations of FoRB within North Korea is North Korean escapee testimony. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 1,000 North Korean escapees would resettle in South Korea every year. However, since the pandemic, the North Korean government closed its border and instituted even stricter security policies on the North Korean population. The South Korean government reports that 96 North Korean escapees resettled in South Korea in the first half of 2025 after extended periods in China and in other countries before arriving.

China has become increasingly complicit in the North Korean government’s persecution of religious adherents and particularly against Christians. Due to the severity of North Korean government repression of freedom of religion, North Korean escapees report that the first time they encounter missionaries and organized religion is during their time in China after fleeing North Korea. Escapees who are repatriated to North Korea by China and who are found to have met with Christian missionaries face harsh punishments. Chinese authorities are reported to be using enhanced surveillance and tracking tools to map networks supporting escapees within China and reporting to North Korean authorities repatriated escapees’ encounters with religious groups and contacts.

International Attention

In February, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) declared that the imprisonment of South Korean missionaries Kim Jung-wook, Choi Chun-gil, and Kim Kook-kie are arbitrary detentions.

In September, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [released](#) the Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), which states that the North Korean government has continued to exercise total control over the population in the 10 years since the landmark UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK in 2014. It notes that the restrictions on religious activities over the past decade “have not softened” and that, despite isolated steps, the human rights situation in North Korea “in many instances, has degraded.”

In August, the South Korean Ministry of Unification suspended the publication of its annual North Korea Human Rights Report, and in October the South Korean government disbanded its North Korean human rights and humanitarian office and abductees response team, attracting concern from civil society organizations about the impact on support for human rights in North Korea.

For the 21st consecutive year, the UN General Assembly Third Committee adopted in November 2025 a consensus resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK with support from the Republic of Korea and the United States. The resolution highlights that North Korean government control was tightened by new laws from 2020 onward that provide severe punishments, including the death penalty, for exercising the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2025, President Donald J. Trump issued executive orders that [paused](#) or [terminated](#) broader human rights programming and U.S. funded international media, which impacted independent organizations that documented and reported on human rights and religious freedom violations in North Korea and throughout Asia.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and the foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea issued a [joint statement](#) from their trilateral meeting in Brussels in April 2025 pledging to continue efforts to address gross violations of human rights in and by North Korea. In November 2025, the White House issued a [factsheet](#) on President Trump’s meeting with South Korean President Lee Jae Myung in which the two leaders “agreed to coordinate closely on DPRK policy and called on the DPRK to return to meaningful dialogue and abide by its international obligations.”

In November 2025, a bipartisan-supported bill, the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2025 ([H.R. 5959](#)), was introduced in the House of Representatives to reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, which lapsed in 2022. The bill includes calls for the position of special envoy for North Korean human rights to be filled and for the State Department to provide annual reports on activities to coordinate and to promote human rights.

The U.S. Department of State last [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.