

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

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

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I will offer three recommendations for U.S. policy based on the findings of Korea Future's recent investigations into the status of freedom of religion or belief in North Korea.

1. The first recommendation has been made already, but it is worth repeating - that is to appoint a Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea.

- Messaging matters, not only for those who may not share the same values and interests, but especially among allies who do. It serves as a concrete demonstration of what one does and does not value.
- Religious freedom and other fundamental human rights are inseparable from the security issues when it comes to North Korea. This is because it is the same political system that sustains the ongoing violations, that also sustains one man's desire for power ahead of the safety and prosperity of a nation, the region, and even the world.

2. The second recommendation is something quite different. That is to understand and expose, at every opportunity, the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and its mission of upholding Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the Ten Principles, rather than vaguely blaming North Korea.

- To understand and expose the mission of the WPK reflects an understanding of what sustains and directs the systematic violations and denials of freedom of religion or belief.
- The source and justification for this behavior is found in a document called the Ten Principles for Establishing the Monolithic Leadership System, which demands that every North Korean citizen unconditionally accepts and obeys the words of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and now Kim Jong Un – that is the essence of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. They are to not only conform their thoughts, actions and speech in

alignment with the leader's teachings, but to also not begin to look to any other source of truth or belief.

- It is through the WPK enforcing the Ten Principles that even those rights guaranteed in the North Korean constitution are denied on a daily basis. Whether it is a government entity, the armed forces, or the secret police, it is an embedded Workers' Party section that directs, controls, and continuously corrects policy and implementations on the basis of upholding the Ten Principles.
- The punishment for actively going against the Ten Principles is severe, including erasure of your identity from the record, the revoking of your status as a person by the party-state, and the death penalty or a life-sentence in the prison camps. Three generations of the convicted individual's family must join them in their fate. I quote from a former high-ranking WPK official: *"Other criminal acts can be forgiven, but if a crime is against ideology, against the work of party propaganda and party organization, there is no such thing as forgiveness. If you committed murder instead, you stand a better chance at mercy."*
- It is important to accurately perceive and call out North Korea's sources of conduct - whereby obedience to Kim must occur even as his orders contravene domestic and international laws, or even undermine North Korea's own national interest - because the Workers' Party enforces the Ten Principles across state and society.
- To call this out educates both North Koreans and the outside world on the root cause of the lack of progress in many areas - in security, human rights, reform and opening, the building of trust and normalized relations. There can be no effective remedy for a problem that has been misdiagnosed.
- It strengthens awareness that there is no hostility toward the nation or people. It is in fact a reminder of the opposite - that we see and remember the many whose lives are being destroyed by a system designed to sustain the adulation of Kim. It foregrounds shared values, of a universal human desire for agency, dignity and enjoyment of fundamental human rights.
- For the realization of alternate viable paths, it is necessary to identify and name the cause of why the whole apparatus of a state is configured in such a way - to serve the whims and desires of one man at the expense of everyone else. Even among the WPK elite, there are individuals that take part in maintaining the system not because they believe in it, but because they have no other choice, and are not allowed the space to think about or talk about another choice.

- If the outside world looks only to Kim, who is the foremost beneficiary of a system he inherited and did not create himself, resting their hopes in him and not seeing that by doing so, this entrenches the very specific and tangible system, and the notion – both inside and outside North Korea – that Kim Jong Un alone can determine the country’s future, then those inside remain at the mercy of the rules that entrap them, that fuel the ongoing violations, and that maintain the diplomatic deadlock.

3. This leads me to the third and final recommendation, that is to recognize and embrace asymmetric leverage.

- First, we must understand the priorities of a Ten Principles system, whereby the job of the WPK is to ensure that the North Korean government prioritizes the continuity of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism – by upholding the information blockade, by preventing free speech and free assembly, by preventing freedom of thought, conscience and religion, by preventing Koreans from imagining another future.
- We must not mirror-image. Due to the structure of Kim’s power and the role of the WPK, what drives their choices and behaviors is not the things we assume would drive them if we were in their shoes. This is because North Koreans live under the Ten Principles, and we do not. As individuals, many of them may want the same things we do – security, peace and prosperity, a brighter future. But remember that they live under the constraints of the Ten Principles, while we do not.
- We must support separation, not entrenchment. The fundamental principle driving every foreign policy choice should be to reinforce, amplify, and support the separation of Kimism from North Korea. The continuity of the Ten Principles does not occur organically. In fact, it is an uphill journey that requires a lot of coordination and concerted effort to sustain and maintain, and there is no need to aid and abet that Workers’ Party mission. Giving aid directly to state agencies strengthens the bonds. Projecting assumptions from our own society by thinking that civil society is allowed to exist, and engaging with that assumption, that strengthens the bonds.
- Projection and mirror-imaging is evident in many well-intentioned attempts at diplomacy with North Korea, whether that is formal or informal, track one or two or track 1.5. To use an example related to religious freedom that is applicable to many other areas of engagement, believing that at least a few official churches are tolerated along with their religious leaders as long they toe the party line, instead of

understanding that these entities are fronts of the WPK United Front Department that distract outsiders from the reality of the absolute nature of the Ten Principles and its demands, that then lead to compromise on principles by self-censoring on human rights for the sake of the hope of future access – without realizing that the counterparts are constrained by and punished according to the Ten Principles – this strengthens the system and closes the doors to a different future. Because it funnels what limited outside bandwidth there is into not seeing the reason for the current deadlock.

- If all those things strengthen Kimism, supporting information flow loosens the bonds, and supporting escapees loosens the bonds, because it is proof for family back home and others maintaining the system that their people can not only survive, but thrive, outside of the system of the Ten Principles.
- This idea could be developed and embedded as a playbook across government entities to be pursued in private and public diplomacy, in interactions with like-minded and non-like-minded countries alike. The Workers' Party is an entity dedicated to ensuring that its idea remains as the only idea. It has in part been so successful in that mission because no other organization has dedicated itself to countering its specific mission.
- It needs bandwidth and political will, and it is not a silver bullet to be used in isolation from other foreign policy tools. But to strategically recognize and embrace the asymmetric leverage of separation is something that has not been tried yet. The approach is based on a sound understanding, it is principled, and it is pragmatic. At the same time, it is a holistic approach that cuts across the silos of how democracies tend to do foreign policy.
- Meanwhile, the WPK is engaged in political warfare, and the only real security guarantee by the outside world is one that it cannot provide, which is to ensure the survival of an institution that grinds against the values held by many in the international community. In the WPK's framework of political warfare, the most formidable enemy is not nations or governments, but the disintegration of the Ten Principles. We must not forget that fact.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today.