



North Korea:

The World's Foremost Violator of Religious Freedom

by Arielle Del Turco

Key Points

North Korea is ruled by a secretive totalitarian regime that is arguably the world's foremost abuser of human rights and violator of religious freedom.

American foreign policy toward North Korea has focused on denuclearization, relegating human rights to a side issue. However, human rights and national security are linked and deserve to be addressed together.

The U.S. should pursue policies to hold the regime accountable for its religious freedom violations by including human rights in negotiations, sanctioning officials, information dissemination within North Korea, and pressuring China.

Summary

Shrouded in secrecy, North Korea remains one of the world's most mysterious countries. Unfortunately, what we do know about North Korea indicates the country is also one of the world's worst abusers of human rights, including violations of religious freedom. The North Korean regime has engaged in an intense crackdown on religion for decades. Today, few religious believers remain, and those who do face grave peril. The secretive nature of the regime nicknamed the "hermit kingdom" makes it difficult for American leaders to address these human rights issues. Yet, even though options are limited, the gravity of the situation calls on Western countries to take every action possible to relieve the suffering of the North Korean people, who have no chance of speaking up for themselves.

“I was beaten with a club by a preliminary investigation officer and was kicked by the officer. The treatment was particularly harsh at the Ministry of State Security. If one is found to have gone to a South Korean church while staying in China, they are dead. I, therefore, tried hard not to reveal my life in China. I was beaten up as a result. I was beaten to a level that my rib was broken. I still feel the pain.”¹

– North Korean defector

Introduction

When President Barack Obama sat down to discuss the state of U.S. foreign policy with incoming president-elect Donald Trump in 2016, he warned that North Korea was the top national security concern.² Four years later, the United States is transitioning to a new presidential administration and not much has changed for the hermit kingdom. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is still pursuing nuclear weapons, alarming its neighbors, and committing some of the most heinous human rights abuses on earth today.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Kim Jong Un rules his country with ruthless brutality. He is responsible for all manner of human rights abuses occurring on his watch, including torture, rape, enslavement, starvation, and murder. The North Korean system of governance is designed to instill terror in its people, ensuring they never step out of line. No one is more familiar with this strategy than North Korea's Christians.

Christians are regularly sent to the most depraved North Korean labor camps. Defectors caught in China and forcibly repatriated back to North Korea face a worse fate than most if they admit to encountering Christians or attending church while in China. Many defectors have testified that the first question North Korean security agents ask in interrogations upon their return is whether they met South Korean missionaries or Christians.

The closed nature of the North Korean regime and the absence of a normal diplomatic relationship between North Korea and the United States makes typical human rights policy proposals impossible. This highly unusual situation requires thoughtful and assertive American proposals to improve the

human rights of the North Korean people. Though the task set before policymakers and diplomats is difficult, the chance that the oppression of North Korean citizens currently imprisoned or tortured simply for their beliefs may ease makes this a goal worth pursuing.

History of Religion in North Korea

Today, North Korea is an atheistic nation in which religious believers, especially Christians, have endured decades of targeted persecution. This is a key component of the state's efforts to eradicate religious belief. Yet, this was not always the case. The Korean peninsula was known as a hub of Christianity just a century ago. Although religion is not allowed in North Korea today, Christianity once flourished in the land now controlled by North Korea. The early 1900's saw a period of immense growth for Christianity there, earning Pyongyang the title "Jerusalem of the East."³ Many of today's North Korean Christians learned of the faith because it was passed down by their families from this time. Notably, Kim Il Sung's parents were reported to be practicing Christians.⁴

This changed abruptly when a communist regime took power in 1948. Kim Il Sung took measures to suppress Christianity almost immediately. Restrictions on churches and religious practice grew tighter with time. Throughout the late 1940's and 50's, Christians were systematically imprisoned, driven into exile, and executed. Kim Il Sung told the People's Safety Agency, charged with acting as secret political police, in a public speech in 1962:

We cannot move towards a communist society with religious people. That is why we had to put on trial and punish those who hold positions of deacons or higher in Protestant or Catholic churches. Other undesirables among the religious people were also put on trial. Believers were given the choice to give up religion so they can get away with labor work. Those who did not were sent to prison camps.⁵

With the enforced absence of public religious expression, Kim Il Sung successfully consolidated power and built a personality cult around himself.⁶ To reinforce his status as a god-like dictator and to affirm the communist party's agenda, the government promoted the ideology of *Juche*, often translated as "self-

reliance.” The sentiment behind *Juche* is a rejection of dependence on others and the conviction that a proper show of revolutionary spirit will enable North Korea to survive on its own as a socialist state. This ideology ignores the fact that North Korea has long depended on the Soviet Union and China for financial support and security. Even since 1991, South Korea has spent over \$5.8 billion on aid and development projects in North Korea.⁷

Some scholars liken *Juche* to a religion since it holds many of the elements often associated with religion, including a comprehensive belief system, holy places, and distinctive customs.⁸ The concept of *Juche* guides much of North Korea’s propaganda, and it is featured in news reports, school curriculum, and state-approved pop songs.⁹ Around 100,000 *Juche* “research centers” exist to promote the ideology. Local North Korean officials reinforce the government’s complete control over the lives of its people through weekly meetings praising the Kim dictators and self-criticism sessions to confess any wrongdoings or lack of socialist fervor for the regime.¹⁰

Traditionally, people on the Korean peninsula adhered to an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism, or Buddhism.¹¹ Shamanism remains popular in North Korea.¹² These more indigenous faiths are thought to contribute to North Korea’s cultural heritage and do not experience the intense crackdown that Christianity does. Reports sometimes surface of authorities’ measures against the practice of shamanism.¹³

Due to the secretive nature of the regime today, an accurate estimate of the number of religious believers in North Korea is difficult to ascertain. Some estimate that 14 percent of the population follows Chondoism while 4 percent follow Buddhism.¹⁴ Open Doors estimates that a little over 1 percent of the population (approximately 300,000 people) is Christian.¹⁵

What’s Happening Now

When Ji Hyeona was growing up in North Korea, the word “faith” meant being loyal to the Kim family dictators. One day, she was taken to the local Ministry of State Security without warning where she was beaten and tortured, unsure why she was singled out for such treatment.¹⁶

Then, the authorities placed Ji's Bible on the desk in front of her. It was a Bible her mother had brought back to North Korea after a trip to China, and Ji had begun to read it. Sadly, her own friend had reported her to the government for possessing a Bible. At the time, Ji was able to talk her way out of further punishment, but she was informed she would not be forgiven if this happened again.

This would not be Ji's last encounter with North Korean authorities. She managed the difficult escape from North Korea four times—and was forcibly repatriated back to North Korea by Chinese authorities three times. Twice in China, Ji was forced into prostitution, and during one repatriation to North Korea, she returned pregnant. Because “mixed-race” babies are not recognized in North Korea, Ji was forced to endure a brutal and heartbreaking forced abortion.

Too many North Korean Christians have stories a lot like Ji's. Although the Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) does provide for freedom of religious belief in Article 68, it specifies that religion cannot “be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order.”¹⁷ This caveat nullifies any meaningful right to religious freedom because North Korean leaders consider Christianity to be a foreign threat to the regime.

In 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK released a comprehensive report on North Korean human rights. It argued the regime's grave violations against human rights “reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world.”¹⁸ It found that the North Korean regime “considers the spread of Christianity a particularly serious threat, since it challenges ideologically the official personality cult and provides a platform for social and political organization and interaction outside the realm of the State.”¹⁹ The North Korean state also recognizes the role Christians and Christian values played in the collapse of communist governments in Poland, the Soviet Union, and other communist countries. The fear that Christians will similarly undermine communist rule in North Korea makes Christians a particular target for persecution.²⁰

There are exactly five state-sponsored churches allowed to operate in Pyongyang, the capital city.²¹ These include three Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and one Russian Orthodox church. Aside from these five churches, there are no formally registered, independent churches in North Korea.

North Korea's social class system continues to present obstacles for the North Korean people, including for those of faith. The *songbun* is a unique sociopolitical classification established in the late 1950's which "determines the status of North Korean citizens based largely on their family's history of perceived loyalty to the government."²² *Songbun* divides the society into three main classes: the "core," "wavering," and "hostile." There are fifty-one sub-groups within those three major categories. In the *songbun* system of 51 sub-classes, Christians and religious adherents have a low status.²³ While the *songbun* had more influence over the daily lives of North Koreans a few decades ago than it does now, the status it assigns can affect the jobs someone may acquire, the education someone receives, and access to basic necessities including food or health care.²⁴

Christians are prohibited from practicing their religion, and those caught doing so are subject to severe punishments.²⁵ Possession of a Bible can be life-threatening. One North Korean defector testified that "many North Korean refugees have Bibles with them when they are repatriated. If they are caught carrying a Bible, they are punished. In North Korea, you can get away with murder if you have good connections. However, if you get caught carrying a Bible, there is no way to save your life."²⁶

Those who follow Christianity do so at enormous risk, and they often live out their faith in an isolated manner. Christians must keep their faith a secret, sometimes even from their own families. Christians in North Korea are often isolated from a faith community. They cannot meet with large groups of fellow believers for worship, for fear of someone informing the regime. Believers know the cost of getting caught is high. The punishment is often immediate imprisonment in a political prison camp or even execution.²⁷ The UN's 2014 commission of inquiry report found that those who are discovered to have been in contact with Christian churches "may be forcibly 'disappeared' into political prison camps, imprisoned in ordinary prisons or even summarily executed."²⁸ North Korea punishes crimes to the third generation of the offender, so if the government discovers a Christian, the Christian's family is often sent to a prison camp as well.²⁹

While Kim Jong Un denies the existence of any prison or labor camps,³⁰ satellite images capture glimpses of large land tracts guarded with towers and barbed wire.³¹ A 2019 U.S. State Department report on North Korean prisons describes two different types of labor camps: the *kwanliso* (kwan-li-so), or political prison camps, and the *kyohwaso* (kwo-hwa-so), or re-education labor camps.³² Christians, thought to be a foreign threat to the authority of the regime, are sent to the *kwanliso*. The conditions of the *kwanliso* are known to be extremely dire, with prisoners forced to perform hard labor much of the day and receiving small food rations.³³ These political prison camps are sometimes called “absolute control zones” and prisoners remain there for the rest of their lives. It is estimated that 50,000 Christians are held in these camps.³⁴ Reports indicate that detainees endure torture, including beatings with electric rods or metal poles, forced submersion in water, and use for medical experimentation.³⁵

Food scarcity and dire malnutrition often force prisoners to catch rats, frogs, snakes, and other rodents to survive. As many as 2,000 prisoners, mostly children, die from starvation every year in North Korea's prison camps.³⁶ The abuse endured by prisoners is challenging to comprehend. The State Department reports:

Methods of torture and other abuse reportedly included severe beatings; electric shock; prolonged periods of exposure to the elements; humiliations such as public nakedness; confinement for up to several weeks in small “punishment cells” in which prisoners were unable to stand upright or lie down; being forced to kneel or sit immobilized for long periods; being hung by the wrists; water torture; and being forced to stand up and sit down to the point of collapse, including “pumps,” or being forced to repeatedly squat and stand with the person's hands behind their back. Mothers were in some cases reportedly forced to watch or to commit the infanticide of their newborn infants.³⁷ Defectors continued to report many prisoners died from torture, disease, starvation, exposure to the elements, or a combination of these causes.

The trial of Otto Warmbier in 2016, an American student who was accused of subversion by North Korean authorities after he allegedly took down a propaganda poster on a tour, demonstrates the regime's paranoia about Christianity. Though Warmbier was Jewish, the court proceedings repeatedly

mentioned the offense of Christianity, and connected his crime to the influence of a friend from an American Methodist church.³⁸ The court sentenced Warmbier to 15 years in a labor prison, but he was sent by medical transport to his hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio after only 17 months, where he died days after arriving in the United States.

The dangers do not end when one escapes North Korea to China. Most North Korean defectors are young women, and an estimated 60 percent of female defectors in China are trafficked by being sold into marriage to Chinese men or forced into prostitution or cybersex trafficking.³⁹

When caught, Chinese authorities forcibly repatriate defectors and hand them over to North Korean authorities, who interrogate defectors upon their repatriation. North Korean women found to be pregnant with half-Chinese babies endure brutal forced abortions.⁴⁰

Defectors who admit to having met any South Korean missionaries or humanitarian workers while in China risk potential execution or being sent to political prison camps (*kwanliso*), instead of the less harsh labor training camps (*nodong danryundae*) or re-education camps (*kyohwaso*). There are also reports about prisoners in the camps being treated worse if the guards know they are Christian.

The journey a North Korean defector must take before finally arriving at freedom is harrowing. The Chinese government's policy of repatriation makes it complicit in North Korea's grotesque human rights violations. Though the Chinese government is responsible for many of its own human rights violations, the international community must also give proper attention to the role China plays in North Korea's abuses against repatriated defectors.

Policy Proposals

The U.S. government is empowered with several tools to address international religious freedom concerns through the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). IRFA established mechanisms such as the Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department, headed by the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, to promote religious freedom in U.S.

foreign policy. Under IRFA, the U.S. State Department has designated North Korea as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) annually since 2001. To maximize its effectiveness, the U.S. government should continue to use its institutional tools to press North Korea on its human rights issues.

Much of American foreign policy toward North Korea has focused on North Korean denuclearization, relegating human rights to a side issue. However, human rights and national security concerns in North Korea are linked, and they deserve to be addressed together. Insecurity about the regime’s power drives North Korea both to develop nuclear weapons to defend against external threats and to crack down on the rights of any potential dissenters to suppress internal threats to the regime.⁴¹ U.S. objectives related to security and human rights are complementary, not contradictory.

The Kim regime has proven stubborn and unbending even in the case of strict international sanctions intended to force a compromise. The closed nature of the regime makes standard diplomacy largely impossible. In such an isolated country, the most effective solution will be likely to come from the North Korean people themselves. However, there are steps the United States government can and should take to support the people of North Korea and press the North Korean government to change.

The United States should pursue the following policies to hold the regime to account for its religious freedom violations:

1. Make Human Rights a Central Part of Any Negotiations with North Korea

The North Korean regime values internal and external security above all else. It is precisely because North Korea’s government views these efforts as serving the same goal that the United State must treat them similarly in negotiations.

Many experts have recommended developing a negotiation strategy with North Korea reminiscent of the strategy employed by Western negotiators that led to the Helsinki Accords and relieved tensions

between the West and the USSR.⁴² Negotiators should make bold human rights demands and press for a freeze in the development of the North Korean nuclear program. Yet, the conditions under which sanctions against North Korea are lifted or eased must be tied to verifiable improvements in its religious freedom and human rights conditions in accordance with international standards. This is consistent with historic U.S. foreign policy. U.S. sanctions against North Korea have been put in place for several reasons in addition to nuclear proliferation,⁴³ including human rights issues⁴⁴ and specifically forced labor allegations.⁴⁵ Therefore, the requirements for lifting sanctions should contain measurable steps by the North Korean government to alleviate the dire human rights situation. One specific demand U.S. officials can make of North Korea is for the release of all Christians, along with children and families, from prison camps

Emphasizing human rights demands during the Helsinki negotiations proved valuable in securing an agreement by which the Soviet Union could be called on publicly to adhere to their human rights commitments, encouraging those inside and outside of the Soviet Union who advocated for greater freedoms there. A similar agreement with North Korea will empower external activists, particularly those in South Korea, to continue to press to improve religious freedom and other human rights conditions in the North.

2. Continue to Sanction Officials for Human Rights Violations

The North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 (NKSPEA) requires the designation and sanctioning of individuals who contribute to North Korea's nuclear proliferation or human rights abuses.⁴⁶ Although North Korea remains under a variety of sanctions overall, the U.S. should not hold back from placing targeted sanctions on North Korean officials suspected to be responsible for human rights violations.

3. Support Efforts to Disseminate Information Inside North Korea

One of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)'s recommendations in its 2020 annual report is to "Instruct the U.S. Agency for Global Media's Open Technology Fund to prioritize projects related to the dissemination of information in North Korea, including projects that utilize legacy broadcast and nonnetworked digital technologies, which are more difficult for authorities to monitor." The U.S. government already devotes funds to increase access to information in authoritarian regimes around the world. Given the dire situation in North Korea, the U.S. should increase funds and attention on this issue. Along with South Korea, the U.S. should encourage private entities to send short wave radio messages and news into North Korea. South Korea and the U.S. should support the efforts of human rights activists to disseminate information into North Korea via USB flash drives and SD cards, leaflets, and other means.

4. Pressure China to Stop Repatriating North Korean Defectors

The United States should condemn China's forced repatriation of North Korean defectors. By turning defectors over to North Korean authorities knowing that they will likely endure brutal punishments in labor camps, the Chinese government is complicit in North Korea's abuses. Along with the government of likeminded countries, the U.S. should build international momentum to pressure the Chinese government to cease repatriations to North Korea. The U.S. can also consider applying Global Magnitsky sanctions or other targeted sanctions on specific Chinese officials responsible for repatriating defectors.

Conclusion

Even after decades of intense and strategic efforts to suppress religion, religious beliefs remain in North Korea. This is a testament to the importance of religion—and religious freedom—to humanity. Although the North Korean government tries to replace religion with state-promoted *Juche*, this empty substitute for religion centered on the ruling Kim family will not satisfy the human soul. Despite the

dangers, Christians and others will still choose to practice their faith in North Korea. The courage of these believers is unparalleled, and their example should motivate those who care about human rights to advocate on their behalf.

As the Biden administration looks to formulate its foreign policy concerning North Korea, human rights must not be relegated to the sidelines. U.S. officials should seek to elevate human rights in its approach to North Korea. To see a changed North Korea that poses no threat to the rest of the world will ultimately require a government that respects its people and allows them to live according to their conscience. The complex, secretive, and unpredictable nature of the North Korean regime presents unique challenges to U.S. leaders. However, the United States government should take every feasible opportunity support the people of North Korea and press the North Korean government to change. The gravity of the situation is itself a call to action.

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