

# ORGANIZED PERSECUTION

DOCUMENTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
VIOLATIONS IN NORTH KOREA



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# USCIRF'S MISSION

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

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# ABOUT THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

## WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and Congressional leaders of both political parties. The Commission's work is supported by a professional, nonpartisan staff of regional subject matter experts. USCIRF is separate from the State Department, although the Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is a non-voting, ex officio Commissioner.

## WHAT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS

Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience leads, and to live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is America's first freedom, it also is a core human right that international law and treaty recognize; a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy and America's commitment to defending democracy and freedom globally; and a vital element of national security, critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

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# INTRODUCTION

This report demonstrates that the North Korean government poses an acute challenge to its citizens' enjoyment of their right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. Violations of this right in North Korea are ongoing, egregious, and systematic, and they are perpetrated and overseen by the active mobilization of organs of the North Korean government. For this reason, we find that the state is the source, the rationale, and the tool for the religious freedom violations documented in this report.

Our investigators undertook in-person interviews with survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators of religious freedom violations in 2020 and 2021. The majority of interviewees had escaped North Korea in 2019. We identified 68 cases of the state prosecuting individuals for their religion or belief or for their association with religious persons. Shamanic adherents accounted for 43 cases, 24 cases were related to Christianity, and one case was related to Cheondogyo.<sup>1</sup> Victims suffered distinct human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest and detention; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; and the denial of life. All names and personal identifying details have been changed in this report to safeguard individuals' privacy.

This report first assesses the organizational structure of religious freedom violations and the associated methods of enforcing compliance. The report then assesses specific forms of violations widely experienced by religious and belief adherents, namely arbitrary arrest and detention, and the

absence of due process and fair trial rights; torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; and the denial of religious freedom.

We find that the denial of religious freedom is absolute. Our findings establish that the persecution of individuals exercising their right to religious freedom in North Korea goes well beyond a government neglecting its duty to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. It also extends beyond a government persecuting one or more social groups for their religion or belief. Rather, the situation that exists is one where the state enforces the absolute denial of religious belief through the active mobilization of organs of the government. This reality offers opportunities for the international community to identify those persons and organizations responsible for documented religious freedom violations and to hold those violators accountable and modify their behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Cheondogyo, or Cheondoism, is a pantheistic religion native to the Korean peninsula. It was founded in the mid-19th century by the leaders of the Donghak religious movement. Cheondogyo combines religious elements of Korean shamanism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity to form its egalitarian religious doctrine. For more information on Cheondogyo, refer to Carl Young, *Eastern Learning and the Heavenly Way: The Tonghak and Chŏndogyo Movements and the Twilight of Korean Independence* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014). For further information on the role of Cheondogyo in North Korea and the persecution of its adherents, refer to Korea Future. *Persecuting Faith: Documenting religious freedom violations in North Korea* (Volume 1). Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.koreafuture.org/nkrfd>

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# ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief (also known as ‘religious freedom’) is considered fundamental under international law. Possessing distinct and interrelated entitlements, international law provides for and guarantees an individual’s right to religious freedom, encompassing theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic beliefs. This international legal framework is principally based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, along with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees; and respective General Comments, standards, and norms that are considered international or customary international law.<sup>2</sup>

Although the North Korean government is not party to all the aforementioned covenants and treaties, it is still bound by fundamental and customary elements and interpretations of the right to religious freedom. However, these freedoms are in fact subordinate to and overruled by a document known as the *Ten Principles for Establishing a Monolithic Leadership System*.<sup>3</sup> This document has as its purpose to bring each North Korean individual’s thoughts and acts in line with the teachings of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un.

It is the primary mission of the Organization and Guidance Department of the Workers’ Party of Korea to uphold the *Ten Principles*. The Organization and Guidance Department accomplishes this through surveillance of the North Korean leadership and central government and party organs, which in turn command the cadres and provincial organs below them, by means of the Workers’ Party of Korea committee system. With the ruling party enforcing the *Ten Principles* across government and society, the document serves as the *de facto* constitution.

Nevertheless, North Korea maintains a separate constitution, as well as a canon of laws that includes a criminal code. Under Article 68 of the constitution “citizens have freedom

of religious belief,” but additional sentences follow to qualify that clause.<sup>4</sup> First, it considers the right of religious freedom as a right to be “granted” by the state, rather than a freedom that is inherent to individuals as it is understood in international law.

Second, it characterizes the right to religious freedom as being guaranteed through buildings and ceremonies approved by the state, rather than the broader fundamental principles that constitute the *forum internum* and *forum externum*. Together with the “granted” aspect of religious freedom under the North Korean constitution, these clauses accurately reflect the situation in North Korea today. The Workers’ Party of Korea maintains, for example, church buildings in Pyongyang. It instructs a small group of approved specialized cadres to perform Christian ceremonies in these buildings, while at the same time forbidding North Korean citizens—including that group of specialized cadres—to live as Christians. Similarly, the Workers’ Party of Korea maintains temples where it instructs a small group of approved specialized cadres to perform the role of Buddhist monks.

Third, the constitution establishes the framework for the political criminalization of religious activities. For example,

2 United Nations. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>; United Nations. “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>; United Nations. “International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.” Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>; United Nations. “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.” Accessed July 22, 2021. [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.12\\_declaration%20elimination%20intolerance%20and%20discrimination.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.12_declaration%20elimination%20intolerance%20and%20discrimination.pdf); United Nations. “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>; United Nations. “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.” Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>; United Nations. “Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.” Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/StatusOfRefugees.aspx>.

3 “Collection of Current Acts and Regulations of North Korea,” National Intelligence Service (South Korea), accessed July 20, 2021, [https://www.nis.go.kr:4016/resources/download/2020\\_north\\_law\\_01.pdf](https://www.nis.go.kr:4016/resources/download/2020_north_law_01.pdf)

4 Ibid, 38.

Article 183 of North Korea's criminal code lists "Crimes of Infringing on Socialist Culture," which include "importing from abroad, or producing, or storing, decadent media without authorization."<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the Workers' Party of Korea, operating on the *Ten Principles*, remains the determining authority of what is harmful to socialist culture, according to what has been taught or ordered by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and now Kim Jong Un.

Owing to the distinct way the Workers' Party of Korea monitors and enforces behavior across society, entities that are not regarded as security or law enforcement agencies in other countries actively implement policies that violate the right to religious freedom. Most prominent in this role are educational and media institutions, through which the Workers' Party of Korea Propaganda and Agitation Department establishes what is politically—and therefore, in practice, criminally—right and wrong. Following these institutions, organizations subordinate to the Workers' Party of Korea, such as the Children's League, Youth League, and Women's Union, manage Workers' Party of Korea surveillance and control among their assigned remits, which are children between the ages of 7 and 13, young adults between the ages of 14 and 30, and women between the ages of 31 and 60, respectively. Finally, work and residential units serve as the long arm of Workers' Party of Korea control, both denying religious freedom and monitoring for signs of religious belief at the level of daily life.

Work units comprised of non-party members report on their members' ideological alignment with the *Ten Principles* to their respective Labor Committees, such as the Farmer's League or Laborers' League, which in turn report to the Workers' Party of Korea. Work units comprising a mixture of Workers' Party and non-party members report in the same way to their respective party committees, which in turn report to the provincial Workers' Party of Korea Committee, which in turn reports to sections of the Central Party Committee in Pyongyang.

These entities then implement policies that prevent individuals from accessing religious materials, prohibit dissemination and manifestation of religious beliefs, and actively support law enforcement and security agencies by reporting to them beyond and in addition to the committee channels.

For example, every North Korean above the age of seven is required to associate with an organizational unit that receives directives from, and ultimately reports back to, the Central Party Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea. People's Units (*inminban*) are compulsory associations tied to one's place of residence and report to the local People's Committee, which reports to the Provincial People's Committee, which in turn is subordinate to the Workers' Party of Korea as its members are attached to an organizational unit of the Workers' Party of Korea.

Another kind of organizational unit is tied to a North Korean's age or place of work. This connects a citizen to everyday law enforcement supervision, as well as to the oversight of the Provincial Party Committee. For example, college students will belong to an organizational unit at their college that eventually reports to the Provincial Party Committee. At the same time, law enforcement officers from the Ministry of People's Security and the Ministry of State Security are attached to each unit at the college. In addition to reporting to their direct administrative supervisors, the security officers attached to such units are also attached to an organizational unit at their local branch, whose province-level Party Committee reports directly to supervisors in the Central Party Committee.

**Song Min Kyu**, a former student, experienced such oversight in frequent lectures designed to deny the right to religious freedom. She told investigators, "Lecture materials were sent from the Provincial Party Committee, via the Provincial Youth League Committee, then to the college branch of the Youth League. Participation was compulsory for all students [...] During these sessions, they told us about religion-related crimes to prevent the students from engaging in them."

To illustrate this systematic denial, we sourced an educational manual produced by the Youth League in 2020 for internal use that describes party directives for its organizational units (excerpts shown in Figures 1 and 2). The directive uses an example of a woman who had learned and disseminated what are referred to as "religious doctrines that bring disease to a person's ability for independent thought" and "religious songs" that had "turned [the woman] into a complete minion of the enemy." In the directive, it describes how the woman was given "the specific task [by a foreign religious person] of gathering people who had gone mad for superstition, to organize them into an anti-state religious group. The woman used every means at her disposal to carry out the task set by the enemy."

5 Ibid, 340.

The directive warns that “youth must take this [case] to heart, using their discerning class-consciousness to recognize and confront the anti-socialist and un-socialist phenomena that occur around them. They must fight strongly with anyone engaging in such acts, whoever their parents are, whatever family they are from, whatever past achievements they have had. They must thoroughly exterminate all kinds of hostile acts that are opposed to socialism.”

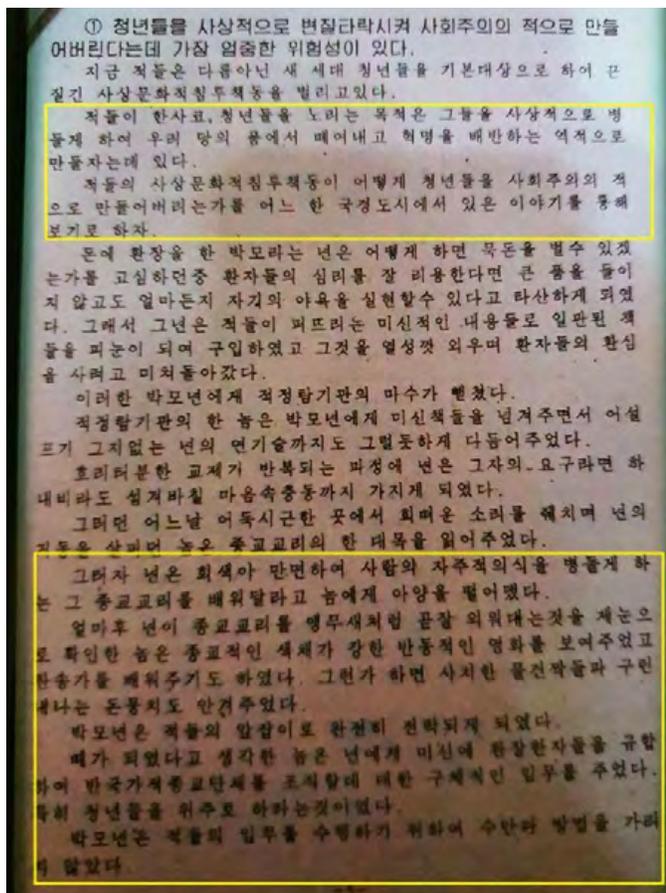


Figure 1. Excerpt from a Youth League Manual for Member Education (2020 edition). The highlighted text states that “the reason that the enemy target the youth is to make them ideologically sick, make them grow apart from the embrace of our Party, and become traitors to the revolution. Look at what happened in a city near the border regions, how the ideological cultural infiltration of the enemy makes youth into enemies of socialism [...] After the man could see that the woman was reciting the religious doctrines as well as a parrot, he showed her a reactionary film that was heavily tainted by religion and taught her religious songs. He also gave her lavish gifts and bundles of cash that had a stench. The woman turned into a complete minion of the enemy [...]” Source: Korea Future, 2021, [www.koreafuture.org](http://www.koreafuture.org)

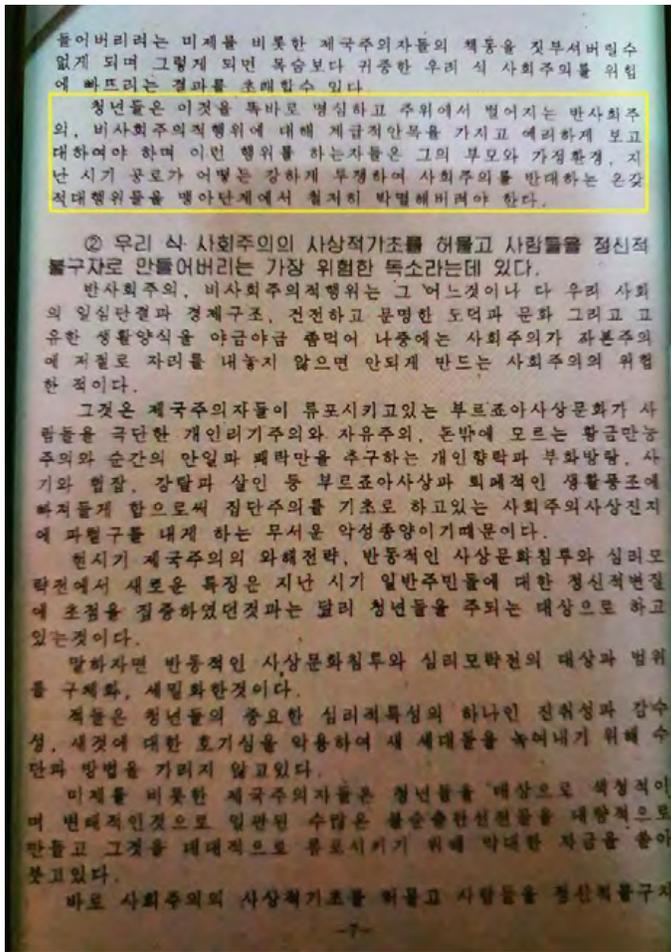


Figure 2. Excerpt from a Youth League Manual for Member Education (2020 edition). The highlighted text states that “youth should strictly follow this directive” and they “must use sharp class-consciousness to detect and confront the anti-socialist and un-socialist activities that occur around them [...] maintain a strict struggle against everyone who opposes socialism regardless of the offender’s family ties, household environment, or past contributions to the republic. Youth should eradicate all anti-socialist activities at their germination stage.” Source: Korea Future, 2021, [www.koreafuture.org](http://www.koreafuture.org)

This system of absolute oversight creates a reporting network whereby all citizens in North Korea effectively come under the oversight of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea through a regional committee, whether one is studying at a college or working as a security official. In turn, this system actively reinforces the denial of religious freedom at the most granular level of every citizen’s daily life. This is evidenced by organizational units serving as the primary conduit for delivery of Workers’ Party of Korea lectures and directives, whether it is a residential unit or a unit of security officials.

**Kim Jin Hyeon**, a former resident of Hyesan, experienced the denial of religious freedom when Workers' Party of Korea officials required his People's Unit to attend lectures every Thursday. "The lectures were about Kim Jong Un and how he visited such and such a location [...] As people can only obey his ideology after learning about him, the lectures primarily featured his work [...] They told us not to practice superstition and what might happen if we did, because Juche is the only belief that we need."

Similarly, **Kim Chil Seok**, a former correctional officer, said: "We constantly received Workers' Party of Korea directives [prohibiting the practice of superstitious activities] from above. They sent those down as the orders and guidelines of Kim Jong Un. We got many of those in 2018 and 2019, about once a month. Previously we got the same content, but only about twice a year [...] Whenever we had such lectures, the political director presented them. Everyone from the [Ministry of People's Security] branch who could attend was present. There were about 200 people at the most, and 70 to 80 people at the least. [...] We met every morning at 08:00 for 20 to 30 minutes, except on Sundays."

Organizational units in North Korea also function as nexus points for Workers' Party of Korea enforcement, through the formal assignment of Ministry of People's Security and Ministry of State Security officers to each unit. They conduct surveillance and deliver Workers' Party of Korea-authorized lectures. **Yeo Min Ji**, a former college student in North Hamgyong Province, recalled: "Once a quarter or a month, officers from the Ministry of People's Security and Ministry of State Security came over to supervise the colleges. They have designated officials who oversee college related matters." Another interviewee noted, "I lived in a small county, so there were only a few institutions. There were only the local Ministry of People's Security and Ministry of State Security officers. [...] Each one of these officials was in charge of individual People's Units."

**Lee Se Ra**, a former resident of Hyesan, attended lectures through a compulsory Women's Union affiliation. She recounted: "Those who graduated from school had to attend [these] lectures calling for the eradication of superstitions [...] The lecturers lumped together into one category escaping into China, narcotics abuse, and the practice of religion—to disparage them all. The lectures were held weekly. Lectures on the prohibition of religion probably took place once every month or two."

In organizational units, assigned security officers recruit informants from within the unit and work with the heads of the units. In residential units, the heads of the units are usually picked from among the most loyal in the unit to deliver Workers' Party of Korea instructions and monitor adherence. Incidents with a political dimension fall under the remit of the Ministry of State Security officer, and those to do with disturbance of social order fall under the remit of the Ministry of People's Security officer.

Recalling a People's Unit lecture in Hyesan, **Ji So Yun** noted, "They told us that the two volumes of the Bible [that had been discovered] were likely not the only copies, and they told us to report any possessors and to turn in any copy of Bibles that we found to law enforcement. [...] Ministry of State Security guidance officers assigned to individual neighborhoods must shoulder the consequences of the slightest political offenses taking place under their jurisdiction [...] We thought of people who possessed Bibles as spies, as the state would sternly warn us on how Bible possession was a political offense."

Another interviewee from Hyesan, **Kim Hye Ri**, told investigators, "Although the People's Unit head usually gives the lecture, the Ministry of People's Security guidance officer shows up carrying a directive to give the lecture with the head whenever things were serious. [...] When Ministry of People's Security officials came down to the People's Unit meetings to give lectures, they told us about how we should be aware that we can get sentenced to re-education based on criminal law if we are recurrent superstition practice offenders."

In sum, the organizational structures imposed by the North Korean government are designed to prevent knowledge of the right to religious freedom as ever existing, and to identify and purge any discovery of religious adherence at its source.

To illustrate this extreme level of control over the lives of every North Korean citizen, we sourced materials internally disseminated to core party workers by the Workers' Party of Korea Organization and Guidance Department and Propaganda and Agitation Department on January 22, 2018 (excerpt in Figure 3). The material was authorized by Kim Jong Un on January 19, 2018 and explains a "political operational plan for party organizational units to carry out an intense extermination campaign to root out un-socialist phenomena throughout the entire party, nation, and populace."

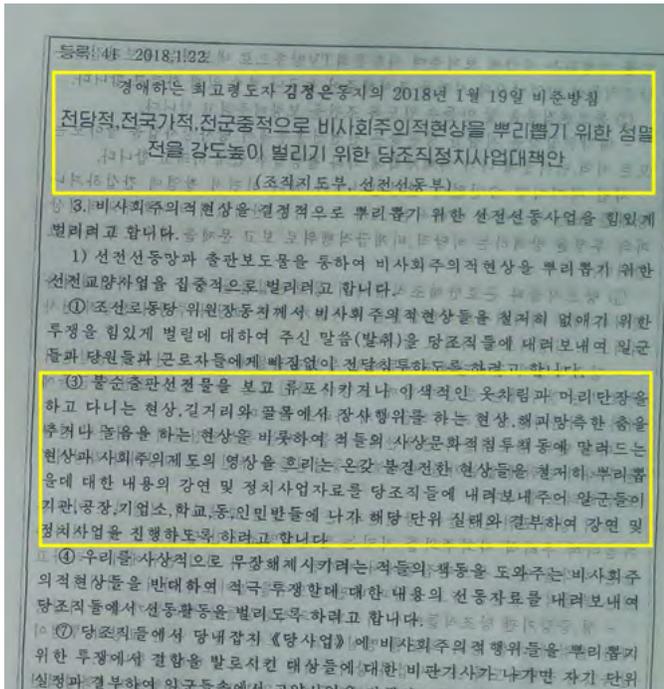


Figure 3. Excerpt from a directive authorized by Kim Jong Un on January 19, 2018, titled ‘A Party Organization and Guidance Political Operation Plan for the Intense Party-wide, Nationwide, and Demographic-wide Extermination of Anti-Socialist Activities.’ The highlighted text outlines a plan to “eradicate activities that amount to ensnarement in the enemy’s ideological and cultural invasion efforts” and to “send down lectures and political materials to all party organizational units, so that workers can carry out political operations appropriate to each unit in factories, businesses, schools, and neighborhoods.” Source: Korea Future, 2021, [www.koreafuture.org](http://www.koreafuture.org)

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# COMPLIANCE, ENFORCEMENT, AND THE DENIAL OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In the North Korean civilian sphere, one or more of the following law enforcement institutions may take part in the arrest of an individual: Prosecutor's Office, Border Security Command, Ministry of People's Security, and Ministry of State Security. In the military sphere, Military Security Command performs the functions of the Ministry of State Security.

The Border Security Command is responsible for patrolling the northern border region. Guards may search and arrest individuals on the spot if there is a suspicion of their having crossed, or intending to cross, the border without authorization. As far as cases related to religious freedom violations are concerned, these guards do not play a specialized role but have been documented as arresting and subjecting those who are caught in possession of Bibles to torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. If there is a need for further investigation and processing of an individual after an arrest, suspects are handed over to other enforcement authorities by Border Security Command.

Within law enforcement, the Ministry of People's Security and Ministry of State Security are the main entities implicated in religious freedom violations. The Ministry of People's Security is a general police force. It may arrest individuals if they are found in the process of committing a crime, or following a warrant authorized by the Prosecutor's Office. By contrast, the Ministry of State Security is a secret police force. It maintains its own prosecution department, court system, and penal facilities.

The Ministry of People's Security is analogous to a national police force in other nations, but it serves a party-political function due to it being subject to Workers' Party of Korea control and its mission of upholding the political system. The Ministry of People's Security has had several changes of name, including in recent years. For example, it was renamed the Department of People's Security in 2010 as part of an effort to place it alongside two other major security organs: the Department of People's Armed Forces and the Department of State Security. It was renamed again in 2016 as the Ministry of People's Security and placed under the State Affairs Commission. Finally, in May 2020, it was renamed the Ministry of Social Security. To avoid confusion, this report continues to refer to it as the Ministry of People's Security, which is conventionally the name most used.

The Ministry of People's Security is the main entity that conducts law enforcement activities according to the criminal code. Among its articles there is no explicit reference to religion, although there are items related to damaging the socialist order and bringing foreign influence into North Korea, as cited earlier in this report.

Nonetheless, one item directly relevant to this ministry's enforcement activities falls under the euphemistic term 'superstitious activities.' This term encompasses religious and belief practices, and commonly refers to Shamanism. Specifically, it dictates that any "person who repeatedly engages in superstitious activities in exchange for money or goods shall be punished by short-term labor for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than three years."

The Ministry of State Security became independent from the Ministry of People's Security in 1973 following an order by Kim Il Sung that called for separating political order operations from public order operations. Its official mission is to protect the Kim family and the political system by uncovering hostile forces engaged in espionage, anti-party, or anti-revolutionary activities.

To carry out its operations effectively, the Ministry of State Security maintains branches throughout the nation, covering administrative regions directly parallel to the ministry, as well as among resident foreigners and overseas postings of North Korean diplomats and dispatched workers. As an intelligence agency, it carries out many of its operations in secret. Ministry of State Security officers do not wear a uniform in public, and individuals released from Ministry of State Security custody are made to stamp their fingerprints on a form stating that, upon release, they will not speak about their experience.

The Ministry of State Security proactively gathers information on potential threats against the political system with a focus on those of a domestic origin, particularly in the form of

ideological tendencies held by individual North Koreans. In turn, this means that the Ministry of State Security is pointedly concerned with the identification of citizens who adhere to monotheistic beliefs such as Christianity.

Thus, it is an implementation of the ministry's core mission, rather than the enforcement of the criminal code, that results in religious freedom violations. Anything that incites or encourages a break from national ideological unity and the *Ten Principles* is considered a threat to the political system. One interviewee remarked, "The Ministry of People's Security handles ordinary cases, but the rule of the law does not really apply under Ministry of State Security jurisdiction. The [Ministry of State Security] facility [I was held in] was used in processing traitors of the nation."

According to individuals whose detention by the Ministry of People's Security or the Ministry of State Security was documented, they experienced violations of international human rights law even before being tried and sentenced. Respondents with pre-trial detention experience described similar patterns across facilities and geographies: namely cases of arbitrary arrest and detention; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; an absence of due process, such as the right to a fair trial; and inhumane conditions, including inadequate amounts of food.

Many of these conditions apply to all prisoners, not only to those detained for their religious beliefs. Nevertheless, it is all the more relevant. Those incarcerated for their religious beliefs effectively become subject to increased human rights denials and violations while receiving the same treatment meted out to all criminal suspects, which further includes strict monitoring that precludes private religious activities such as prayer.

Further, two systems of sentencing exist for those accused of crimes related to religious beliefs. One involves a public prosecution process managed by the Ministry of People's Security and the Prosecutor's Office, according to the criminal code. Documented sentences for crimes related to religious beliefs handled by the Ministry of People's Security and the Prosecutor's Office, which almost exclusively concern adherents of Shamanism, range from six months in a forced labor camp to over three years in a re-education facility.

The other system involves a secret prosecution process managed by the Ministry of State Security, with typical sentences ranging from 15 years in a prison camp for an individual found guilty to life sentences in a prison camp for up to three generations of the immediate family of an individual found guilty. The Ministry of State Security exclusively handles cases relating to adherents of Christianity.

# DENIAL OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FROM BIRTH

Under international law, every person possesses the right to adopt, change, and renounce a religion or belief; the right to manifest a religion or belief; the right to worship and to establish places of worship; the right to display religious symbols; and the right to teach religion or belief and to disseminate religious materials, including missionary activity. Further, parents and guardians possess the right to ensure the religious and moral education of their children, while children possess the right to learn of religions or beliefs in an unbiased and objective way.

Each of these rights protects the individual, and not religion or belief itself. Consequently, the North Korean government retains only the narrowest legal means to limit the freedom to manifest a religion or belief and only when the government can prove that such restrictions are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

At its most essential level, North Koreans experience the denial of the right to religious freedom from birth. In an interview, **Hong Na Yong** explained that in childhood, “[School] lessons feature missionaries, and there are also movies about the missionaries. There is actually a movie titled *The Missionary*. The movie features an American missionary who came to Korea during the Japanese colonial occupation period and swindled children after pretending to care about them. After people watched the movie, they developed a negative impression of the missionaries on an intuitive level. People even use the word ‘missionary’ as a curse word.”

Another interviewee, **Lee Yong**, recalled, “there was a separate subject that completely demonized the missionaries. The very purpose of that subject was to stress how horrible the missionaries are and how horrible religion and the practice of superstition is.” In turn, **Won Du Jae** explained, “We do not know who Jesus is, but we are educated to be afraid of the cross. They teach us in school that [crosses] are for hanging people or bleeding people to death.”

Exhibition halls, which are present in every province, serve as permanent institutions where ‘anti-socialist behaviors,’ including religious acts, are denounced and portrayed as evil. **Yang Keum Jun** recalled how Sinchon Museum in South Hwanghae Province featured a “missionary who tattooed the word *thief* onto a child’s forehead with acid because the child picked and ate a rotten apple [...] I used to think about how scary the missionaries and practitioners are rather than how an actual church functioned when I was living in North Korea. We would think of [religious people] as villains and murderers.”

On state-run television, children and adults are further exposed to anti-religious materials. **Keum Jin Soo** told investigators, “There is something called the *Class Education Material Recordings*. These are television programs, each about 30 to 40 minutes long, and they feature the arrest of enemy spies who had infiltrated into the interior of North Korean society and engaged in anti-socialist sabotage. These [materials] display Bibles they had confiscated from house searches conducted on spies. There was an actual Bible, with the words ‘complete edition of the Bible’ written on the cover. I used to think of the Bible as a fortune telling device.”

Christianity is, in most documented cases, directly associated with the United States. **Shin Nam Ki** told investigators, “I used to think that almost all missionaries were Americans when I was little. As I grew up, however, I started to know better. Aside from the curriculum contents, this perspective was encouraged through graphic novels rather than movies. There were graphic novels featuring contents such as Christian missionaries coaxing children into a church and drawing their blood in the basements. These comic books were published by the government.”

The absolute denial of the right to religious freedom extends from childhood into adulthood. For example, the Women’s Union is just one of the nationwide organizations through which the Workers’ Party of Korea exercises control over the ideological alignment of non-party members. All North Korean women between the ages of 31 and 60 who do not hold Workers’ Party of Korea membership, and who are housewives or are not employed at a state-assigned workplace, are required to be members of the Women’s Union.

The Women’s Union is structured in such a way that every local committee is subordinate to a higher committee, which consolidates the work of several committees and ultimately reports to a section of the Central Committee in Pyongyang. As with the case of the Ministry of People’s Security and the Ministry of State Security, the Women’s Union’s coverage

reaches to the level of each residential area, and units of the Women's Union form parallel surveillance structures alongside People's Units. This is achieved through the former's duty to conduct regular criticism sessions among its members and report on the political life of its members, as well as through the embedding of Ministry of People's Security and Ministry of State Security officers.

**Mun Ki Yeong**, a former member of the Women's Union, explained how self-criticism sessions were used for members of the Union who were accused of religious or belief adherence, and how these meetings became an extrajudicial process. "The Women's Union has its own instructors, and the head of the County Women's Union Committee serves as the instructor from time to time depending on the occasion. Other people who direct the lectures include the Deputy Head, Guidance Officers, and professional lecturers. They get different people to give lectures depending on who the occasion calls for. The county-level unit's head mostly directed meetings, so the deputy would give the lectures most of the time [...] There were a few mothers [arrested for Bible possession] [...] They also found a couple of people telling fortunes using birth dates and numerology. These people

were forced to stand on public ideological criticism stages for the practice of superstition. The Women's Union hosts such sessions for the people under its jurisdiction. It calls three to four people to the stage and has them criticize one another until they are on the verge of tears. Afterwards, they even make the people in the crowd criticize the people on stage until they vow to never practice superstition again. They even bring over people from other neighborhoods to stand on the stage together."

Alongside the Youth League and the various Workers' Leagues, the Women's Union is one of the essential means by which the Workers' Party of Korea exercises control over those who would not otherwise be covered by the political committee systems. Through the Women's Union, the Workers' Party of Korea maintains the capacity to regularly deliver political directives and indoctrination materials into every home with a woman. This mechanism also enables the Workers' Party to subject women and their households to a structured and systematic form of political surveillance and accountability—including the monitoring and reporting of suspected religious and belief adherents.

# ARBITRARY ARREST, DETENTION, AND THE ABSENCE OF DUE PROCESS AND FAIR TRIAL RIGHTS

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention finds that the deprivation of liberty becomes arbitrary under several circumstances, such as when an arrest or detention does not invoke any legal justification for the deprivation of liberty. Similarly, when an arrest or detention results from the exercise of rights or freedoms guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it takes an arbitrary character, as does a disregard for the international norms relating to the right to a fair trial that results in the deprivation of liberty.<sup>6</sup> In practice, there are very few instances where the arrest of a North Korean exercising his or her freedom of religion or belief may be considered lawful.

North Korean citizens, including those arrested for religious freedom-based reasons, must be afforded fair trial rights. These include the right to be informed of charges upon arrest, the right to be brought before a court within a reasonable time, the right to consult with and be represented by legal assistance or an attorney of one's choosing, the right to adequate time for preparation of a defense, and the presumption of innocence. These rights further rely upon an independent and transparent judiciary or tribunal, and other key elements, such as the right to appeal.

We did not document any cases of the Ministry of People's Security or the Ministry of State Security issuing court orders or arrest warrants or making individuals aware of their rights at the moment of arrest. On the issue of informing suspects that they were being arrested, we documented differences between Ministry of People's Security and Ministry of State Security processes. **Jung Seol Bin** was arrested and detained by Samjiyon Ministry of State Security after being approached in the following manner: "When someone tells you that they are from the Ministry of State Security and asks you to accompany them for questioning, you comply. The officer who came to our house was not wearing any uniform or any rank insignia."

This is not unrelated to fundamental differences in *modus operandi*. Ministry of People's Security officers are seen working in public as law enforcement officials, while Ministry of State Security officers operate in secret, in the manner of an

intelligence agency. Yet the lack of transparency surrounding arrest and pre-trial detention by the Ministry of State Security extends beyond the moment of arrest.

According to **Min Hyeong Guk**, who was detained by the Hyesan Ministry of State Security for several weeks, "They did not provide any explanations on why I was held for an extended period [...] They told me to think of them as teachers and myself as a student." Another illustration of such lack of transparency comes from a former detainee who had been held by the Ministry of State Security for 20 days and given no explanation when moved out of Ministry of State Security custody and into Ministry of People's Security custody.

Reflecting the bureaucratic nature of law enforcement entities in North Korea, however, there are some evident aspects of due process in the arrest and pre-trial detention of individuals. These include restrictions on the length of pre-trial detention and the review of cases by officials from an entity other than the arresting entity, at least in the case of the Ministry of People's Security. However, for both the Ministry of People's Security and the Ministry of State Security, there is little in the way of due process that serves to protect an individual's rights "to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense" or "to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal," as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations. "Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention." Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Detention/Pages/OpinionsadoptedbytheWGAD.aspx>

Although cases investigated by the Ministry of People's Security end up in the courts, cases involving sentences of less than one year in a forced labor camp do not go to trial. Interviewees who received longer sentences described a court composed of a prosecutor, a judge, and three lay persons selected by the People's Committee for their Party loyalty. This system predominantly concerns adherents of Shamanism.

As for legal representation, criminal defendants cannot themselves engage an attorney, but they may be represented by a state-assigned attorney. In practice, the role of a defense attorney is perceived to be that of defending the state. **Lee Eun Mi** told investigators, "I had one attorney consultation before the trial [...] The defense attorney did not argue in my favor. He said that there was nothing to argue as I had already confessed to the crime [...] As he was a state-appointed attorney, he was not on my side."

Although we are not able to access a statistically random sample of criminal cases in North Korea, there is sufficient credible and structural evidence to suggest that these are institutional realities in a criminal justice system subject to Workers' Party of Korea control, rather than a matter of isolated failures.

For example, defense attorneys belong to the Central Defense Attorney League, which is an organizational unit of the Workers' Party of Korea, and a defense attorney's duty to political reporting means there can be no expectation of anything like client-attorney confidentiality. **Kang Ga Mi**, a former detainee from North Hamgyong, said "[Attorneys] come and ask you whether you were coerced into confession or were beaten, but they tell the authorities about what you

said. [...] They tell the officials everything because they are on the same side."

Especially for cases that are related to offenses against the political system, it is not in the interest of the court or the defense attorney to be seen to side with the defendant. As **Park Sung Hwa**, a former judicial professional in North Korea, explained, "I would not take the defense attorneys seriously. [...] They cannot voice opinions, and winning against prosecutors does little good for them."

Prosecution of Shamanic adherents falls primarily under the purview of the Ministry of People's Security, with the Prosecutor's Office handling some cases. However, we note that the Ministry of State Security had also begun to handle Shamanic cases between 2013 and 2014 following party directives to crack down on 'superstitious activities,' and we further note a significant increase in government directives on the illegality of Shamanism since 2016.

Beyond the courtroom, public trials and public criticism sessions serve as extrajudicial forms of justice and punishment for religious and belief adherents. Public trials may involve public criticism sessions where citizens are forced to witness the punishment of a person for anti-socialist acts, such as Shamanic practice. Public criticism sessions are overseen by provincial level authorities and the individuals who are the focus of these sessions will have been interrogated prior to their public trials. The forced attendance and participation of children in these sessions was documented as common practice by our investigators, and we in turn sourced imagery of this practice, which is displayed in Figure 4.



Figure 4. This image shows a public trial for individuals accused of anti-socialist behavior where students and local residents were required to attend. Children of a young age, who are recognizable by the red scarves of the young pioneers, are seated at the front of the crowd. Images of trials, such as this, are very rare and taken at great risk. It is illegal to capture and share such images with the outside world.

Source: Korea Future, 2021, [www.koreafuture.org](http://www.koreafuture.org)

Public criticism sessions gather citizens from local workplaces and People's Units, along with students from middle schools, high schools, and colleges, to witness the public criticism of Shamanic adherents. **Mun Ki Yeong** provided a vivid account of one such session that involved a group denouncement of several individuals accused of anti-socialist behaviors, including the practice of superstition. She also observed how such events were hosted on an annual basis.

**No Kyeong Min**, who provided detailed information on the list of individuals summoned by law enforcement to stand witness in public trials, recalled: "People commonly stood on public criticism stages for the practice of superstition [...] I participated in the Pokchöngdong Union activities from 2010 to 2016. The public criticism session took place during winter; I remember it being freezing. I think it was during the 100-day prayer session in memory of Kim Jong Il [...] the fortune teller was put on the public criticism stage because she had been unfortunate enough to be reported during a time like that."

**So Hyeon Min** observed that public criticism sessions were conducted with a zealous fervor during Juche ideology-related national holidays. "In the fall of 2018, I went to the market to buy some rice. A crowd had gathered at the stadium in the middle of Hoeryong, and it turned out that a woman had been made to stand on public trial over the practice of superstition [...] A Ministry of People's Security official got his hands on a notebook in which the woman had recorded who had patronized her and how much she charged them for fortune telling. They [the officials] had gathered up everyone on the list at the stadium and had a criticism session. In the end, she was sentenced to eleven years of re-education [...] Every organization in Hoeryong had participated as it was a public trial. Even the students who had graduated elementary school came to the event. I think about 100,000 people gathered at the stadium. People who lived in Kwangandong and Semaüldong neighborhood talked about nothing else for a while as it was such a major incident."

One interviewee, **Kim Gap Ji**, corroborated information provided by other interviewees that a 2018 directive from Kim Jong Un on the eradication of superstition was explicitly referenced in one public trial to justify harsher punishments of Shamanic adherents during the proceedings.

Consulting with Shamanic practitioners for fortune telling, exorcisms, or warding rituals is a widespread practice in North Korea that crosses socio-economic divides. Despite its

illegality, many of our respondents, including some former officials, had encountered or engaged in the practice while in North Korea. In line with Shamanic practice being perceived as a relatively minor crime, at least in contrast to the practice of organized religion such as Christianity, we came across cases of practitioners being interrogated and released with a warning. For example, one interviewee, a formerly practicing Shaman, was arrested in 2017 and was interrogated, severely beaten, and released after two weeks.

However, in recent cases there was little leniency in the punishments meted out to Shamanic adherents. **Yang Keum Jung** was imprisoned in 2019 alongside Shamanic adherents who were sentenced based on Kim Jong Un's 2018 directive. Yang told investigators, "Some were sentenced to seven to eight years of re-education because of [the directive]. Minor offenders were sent to labor camps, but I saw major or repeat [Shamanic adherents] get sentenced to seven to eight years of re-education. I witnessed it myself; I sat [in the same cell] with them, together."

We documented instances where bribes were used successfully to reduce a sentence from six months in a forced labor camp to three months, or where cooperation with the authorities occurred in lieu of punishment. However, our investigators documented executions for Shamanic practices, including one incident in Pyongyang in 2014 and another in Chongjin in 2018.

**Kim Jin Hwang** observed how his friend, a fortune teller arrested following the announcement of the 2018 directive, received harsher punishments than did those arrested during other periods. "In my friend's case, he had to pay a lot of bribes to get three months of forced labor training as people who were arrested for the practice of superstition originally received three years of re-education." Similarly, Shin Nam Ki told investigators how a personal acquaintance arrested for Shamanic practice would have been sentenced to three years of re-education if not for a bribe.

**Jung Chun Deok**, who served as a public official, offered testimony based on his personal experience and involvement with the North Korean law enforcement system. He testified that "everybody knows who the fortune tellers are, and [one] was an old woman with only about ten years left [to live], so they initially let her off with warnings. [But when] Kim Jong Un sent down directives calling for the punishment of all Shamanic practitioners, the elderly fortune teller was punished and sent to a re-education camp."

As someone who frequently visited fortune tellers, **Park Na Jung** regularly discussed the whereabouts and activities of various fortune tellers with her acquaintances. Through participating in such conversations, Park was able to gather reliable information on what types of punishments each fortune teller received following their arrest by law enforcement authorities. Park stated that she considered the types of divination methods that fortune tellers employed were relevant in determining what degree of criminal sentence they received in the event of arrest.

Similarly, **Nam Ki Seong**, who practiced fortune telling and personally witnessed more than five cases of Shamanic adherents being arrested for their practice, told investigators “the more cases you accumulate from practicing as a fortune teller for many years will contribute to a re-education sentence. How many months of forced labor you receive depends on how many months you have practiced and on the relevant evidence. The longer you practice and the more clients you see, the harsher the punishment.” **Song Na Jin**, who was introduced to a variety of fortune tellers through her acquaintances within her neighborhood’s Women’s Union, also observed that fortune tellers who used divination literature for their practice received harsher punishments for their offense.

This assessment was corroborated by **Ryang Ki Deuk**, a former legal professional in North Korea. While protesting what he thought was a flaw within the North Korean criminal justice system, he revealed that the law enforcement authority’s perception of a fortune teller’s ideological deviancy had played a part in determining the severity of the sentence a fortune teller received following her conviction. “I heard she got about five years. How severe a sentence one gets depends on individual cases, but they pay special attention to cases involving [a Shamanic book].”

Due to the somewhat freer environment that exists in China regarding freedom of association and freedom of access to information, North Koreans who have crossed into China and are later forcibly repatriated by the Chinese government in violation of international law become targets for political screening. Before further criminal processing is handled by the Ministry of People’s Security, forcibly repatriated North Koreans are incarcerated in a holding center where the Ministry of State Security interrogates them on their activities while they were outside North Korea, including their potential encounters with religious persons or materials.

Among interviewees who had encountered a North Korean Christian directly, many reported these occasions occurred while they were transiting illegally in China or while incarcerated in a Ministry of State Security holding center after having been forcibly repatriated from China. In one case, an individual who was detained at a provincial holding center shared his cell with another person who was being interrogated under suspicion of religious association. After being interrogated for three months and not confessing, he was released to the Ministry of People’s Security and received a one-year forced labor camp sentence for another crime.

Moreover, we documented credible accounts of the execution of Christian adherents who had practiced within the territory of North Korea, rather than in or through China. It is noteworthy that details from these incidents come from former security officials, reflecting the level of secrecy with which the state deals with incidents of Christianity that arise domestically.

Among these cases, **Kwon Eun Som** and her grandchild were executed in July 2011 in Onsong County, North Hamgyong Province, with only a few security and law enforcement officials present to witness the event. The execution was by firing squad and took place outside Hajong-ri in Onsong County. It was overseen by Onsong Ministry of State Security branch personnel, acting on the authority of the North Hamgyong Ministry of State Security in Chongjin.

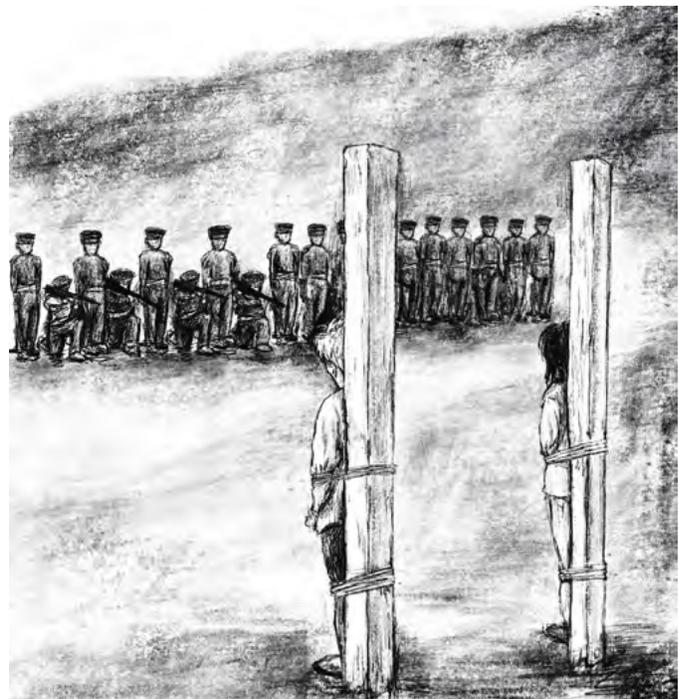


Figure 5. Depiction of North Korean government-sanctioned execution of a woman and her grandchild convicted of practicing Christianity. Source: Kim Haeun, Korea Future, 2021, [www.koreafuture.org](http://www.koreafuture.org)

In another instance, six people convicted of practicing Christianity were executed in secret by firing squad in 2015, in Yeonan County in South Hwanghae Province, with up to 40 others sentenced to a political prison camp for life. The execution marked the culmination of a case that was investigated over several years using infiltrator agents, led by Ministry of State Security Central Command with joint operational control by the Directors and Political Directors of South Hwanghae Ministry of State Security and Yeonan Ministry of State Security.

In March 2002, three members of the **Lee Min Park** family were arrested in a joint raid by officers from Ministry of State Security Central Command and from South Hwanghae Ministry of State Security, following four months of surveillance and wiretapping. After 30 days of pre-trial interrogation, they were sentenced to execution for conducting Christian worship.

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# TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN, OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT

The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment defines torture as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.”<sup>7</sup>

We documented multiple instances of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment being perpetrated by North Korean pre-trial investigation officers and correctional officers against persons suspected of religious adherence. Such treatment included physical beating; positional torture; deprivation of food, water, and sleep; verbal abuse; contaminated and polluted food; body cavity searches and forced nudity; the use of open toilets; hanging torture (also known as ‘Pigeon Torture’); and exposure to extreme violence inflicted upon fellow prisoners.

These acts were committed for the purposes of obtaining information or a confession, for the purpose of punishment, or for the purpose of intimidation during the interrogation phase of detention. Several respondents stated that the torture stopped after they offered a written confession. The primary locations for documented cases of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment were penal facilities, including waiting rooms, holding centers, and pre-trial detention centers.

The documented frequency of the use of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment by multiple public officials in multiple penal facilities suggests that the infliction of severe physical and mental pain or suffering upon prisoners is present across state organizations and penal facilities.

Positional torture was widely used against religious or belief adherents during their detention. This form of torture forces a victim to remain in a fixed position for an extended period of time that varies from minutes to hours. Positional torture targets tendons, joints, and muscles and can lead to severe

muscular pain, the pooling of blood and tissue swelling, and the formation of blood clots.

**Lee Ki Je** experienced positional torture at a penal facility in Hyesan City, Ryanggang Province. He explained: “We were forced to get up at 05:00 and required to sit in a fixed lotus posture. After sitting like that since 05:30, we were fed at 07:00. After breakfast at 07:00, we would sit [in a fixed position] until 11:00. We were given a 30-minute break [...] After that, we were forced to sit in a fixed posture from 12:00 to 18:00. Dinner was at 18:00, and we were back to sitting from 18:30 to 22:00. The correctional officers, however, take liberties and do not let prisoners go to sleep if the inmates cross them, even slightly. They will not let you sleep until 00:00 or 01:00 in that case. That is the everyday routine within the cells.”

Another case of positional torture was experienced by **Kim Jin Pyeong**, who recalled: “There were about five people in each cell, and they would beat us brutally if we talked the wrong way. The correctional officers could not beat us too hard, but they beat us if they could get their hands on us for talking or fidgeting while sitting [...] I did not see them use batons. They just beat us with their hands. They would grab our hair [from the other side of the cell door] and slam our heads against the cell bars by pulling our hair.”

Ministry of State Security officials subjected **Hong Na Young** to positional torture. According to Hong, “[Ministry of State Security interrogation officers] make the prisoners sit around all day, and they start the interrogations from 21:00, when it is necessary. When you lie down to sleep after roll call, they open the door and take you out of the cell. The sound of

<sup>7</sup> United Nations. “Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.” Accessed July 22, 2021. [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1987/06/19870626%2002-38%20AM/Ch\\_IV\\_9p.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1987/06/19870626%2002-38%20AM/Ch_IV_9p.pdf)

people getting tortured upstairs keeps people from going to sleep out of the fear it inspires [...] No matter how tough you are, torture will break you.”

Physical beating constituted another widespread form of torture and included the violent acts of hitting or kicking a prisoner with bare hands, feet, or with objects including an *oseungakja* (wooden baton), metal rifle rods, or farming tools. One interviewee who was detained with multiple Shamanic adherents told investigators that “it was a common sight to see people get kicked” by correctional officers in penal facilities. Another interviewee said, “The officers would kick you and punch you and harass you [...] The officers do not treat the prisoners as people [...] They would hit us with whatever they had in hand.”

The testimony of **Yang Keum Jung** indicates how multiple methods of torture are employed as a means to coerce prisoners into a confession and as a means of enacting censure. “There is a wooden stick about 1.5 meters long for hitting people, for hitting your limbs and torso [...] They used to make us do forced squats [...] They made us do 200 to 300 of those back in 2012 and 2013, and they would make us hang from the top of the holding cells all day [...] [T]hey would grab you by your hair and dash you against walls or the ground, kick you with boots on, hit you with sticks and fists [...] They would hit a person who was arrested for superstition if they did not cooperate [...] Religion and superstition are completely different. They hit you less for superstition as it is not an enemy-related offense like religion. Practicing religion is an enemy-related crime, but practicing superstition is an ordinary criminal case.”

**Jung Chun Deok** testified that a prisoner’s expression of his Christian faith through prayer had angered correctional officers who in turn enacted physical beatings upon the prisoner. Jung and his fellow prisoners were exposed to graphic displays of violence during these occasions. “One time they beat [the Christian prisoner] to the brink of death, leaving the person bleeding on the ground. But this person got up and prayed just the same the next morning. Inmates wake up at 06:00 and there is an hour where we eat our ration and wash ourselves. We also fold our bed linen, and this person would pray within the 30 to 40 minutes of free time [...] The Ministry of State Security officials would yell at the person, “Come here!”, and they would beat the person with a club. Correctional officers would come into the cell and kick the person with [their] boots on, but the person would still pray every day [...] In the end, the Ministry of State Security officials would curse at the person [saying] that he should just drop dead. This person received 15 years in the political prisoner camp.”

The experience of **Kim Jin Hwang** is also illustrative of the extent of physical beatings perpetrated against religious and belief adherents. She explained how a woman in her sixties was arrested for adhering to Shamanism in 2018 in Hyesan: “She had been beaten severely around the head [...] She told me that [correctional officers] grabbed her by her hair and dashed her and kicked her [...] There was another fortune teller. [She] was also beaten a lot [...] She would return to the cell beaten up in the evenings, and she made quite a ruckus. They arrested most fortune tellers in November 2018 [...] I saw that they beat the fortune tellers a lot during interrogations. But then again, everybody gets beaten during interrogations. No interrogator will try to cajole you with words. They all beat you. For example, they dash you against the floor by yanking your hair, they kick you, and they punch you with leather gloves on. There is an allotted interrogation period [...] During this period, [the correctional officers] do not even let you sleep, often dragging you out of the cell for interrogations in the middle of the night [...] The fortune tellers were beaten before they were transferred into the cell. The fortune teller who I mentioned earlier had all her teeth knocked out from the beatings. I told her to never confess no matter how much they beat her.”

**Kim** explained that Ministry of State Security interrogation officers announced to prisoners that they would be beaten prior to their interrogation. “They ask the prisoners whether they will be able to handle it. The prisoners I saw in the waiting room who were transferred from Ministry of State Security had bruises all over their backs from the beatings.” **Kim** further explained that “interrogators already want a specific kind of confession, and they will beat you until they get it. Everyone confesses because they are so scared of the beatings. They do not even let the fortune tellers sleep until they get the confession they want. Tough ones usually hold out, but the interrogators seldom give up. They beat you like an animal.”

Coercion and forced confessions for suspected religious and belief adherence were documented and did not necessarily lead to a reduction in physical forms of torture. Coercion, often in the form of false promises of forgiveness upon a confession, were documented in Ministry of State Security penal facilities. **Son Jun Ho**, a former detainee in North Pyongan Province, said “[the] Ministry of State Security tells you that you will be forgiven if you confess. In reality, anything related to religion or South Korea, even by the smallest margin, or taking money from religious institutions, will land you in prison for life.”

In Hyesan, **Ko Sun Hee** recalled a Christian adherent who was interrogated by Ministry of State Security interrogation officers. The Christian adherent was told that her husband had been arrested and she was forced to listen to a man screaming “Please forgive me” over a phone. A correctional officer entered the Christian adherent’s cell, which was shared with Ko, and jeered at the woman, asking her whose voice she thought it was and said that her husband had already confessed.

Solitary confinement was also documented as being deployed for both Christian and Shamanic adherents. Solitary confinement cells differed by penal facility, but the existence of extreme violence and inhumane conditions was a constant. **Nam Tae Hee**, who was suspected of assisting a Shaman and was arrested by the Ministry of People’s Security, explained: “They threw me into a solitary cell and snapped my legs before they did anything else. I collapsed to the ground, and I knew that they hurt my legs first so that I could not run.” **Ko Sun Hee** said, “They did not even let the prisoners locked in solitary confinement go to the toilet. Correctional officers and interrogators do not think of those inmates as fellow humans.”

**Nam Jin Kyu**, a former detainee, explained how a prisoner who had been arrested for smuggling a small copy of the Bible from China to North Korea was locked in solitary confinement. “I think they were going to be executed. I did not get to see their face. The solitary confinement cell is the scariest room in the facility, and it does not even have electric lights [...] Correctional officers would torment those prisoners especially horribly during the patrol which took place every two hours [...] The correctional officers would take the metal cleaning rod for a rifle and have the prisoner stick out their hands and strike them with the metal rod mercilessly. The correctional officers screamed that ‘how dare the prisoner sneak a Bible into North Korea and harm comrade Kim Il Sung’s ideology’ [...] The person in solitary confinement would only get one meal a day whereas others got three. They only got one serving of the bloated corn kernels boiled into a muck.”



Figure 6. Depiction of hands of a prisoner accused of smuggling a Bible into North Korea being beaten with a metal cleaning rod for a rifle by a correctional officer. Source: Kim Haeun, Korea Future, 2021, [www.koreafuture.org](http://www.koreafuture.org)

While the occurrence and intensity of physical torture experienced by religious crime suspects varied with the disposition of the officers in charge, the incarceration environment of Ministry of State Security detainees stood out for the mental torture brought on by the uncertainty of release, the oppressive environment, and acts of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. Former detainees spoke of the mental fear instilled by public officials that often preceded physical violence and torture.

**Ko Sun Hee** experienced incarceration in various penal facilities. She observed how Ministry of State Security interrogators and correctional officers often encouraged prisoners to persecute other prisoners who refused to cooperate with their investigations. Encouragement took various forms, such as the application of subtle threats, sleep deprivation, and food deprivation.

Deprivation of both food and water was documented during the detention of suspected religious and belief adherents. In many cases it was unclear whether this was intentional or as a result of poor resources. In other cases, the character of the denial of food was unmistakably intentional. **Jeon Mi Jin**, a former detainee in Chongjin, explained, “You are always hungry in the cells, so they would tempt me by placing a packed lunchbox on the table and asking me to talk [...] When I kept on refusing, they got angry and beat me as well [...] They would dash my head against the wall and people downstairs would hear the sound.”

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# CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this report demonstrate that arbitrary arrest and detention; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; and the denial of fundamental religious freedom rights have been perpetrated against religious and belief adherents by organs of the North Korean government. These violations, which were documented as occurring as recently as 2020, are seemingly designed to remove all traces of Christianity and to repress and reduce the influence of Shamanism in society. The campaign to exterminate all Christian adherents and institutions in North Korea has been brutally effective, and continues through the work of the Ministry of State Security, networks of informants that stretch into China, the presence of ‘no-exit’ political prison camps, executions, and an educational and organizational system that deters adherence through schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Under Kim Jong Un, the impact of discrimination and persecution against Shamanism has increased. We have documented increased violations against Shamanic adherents based upon directives issued by Kim Jong Un, and we note that many forms of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment have been experienced by Shamanic and Christian adherents alike.

The scale and severity of the documented violations surpass a state neglecting its duty to respect, protect, and fulfill its obligations under international law. Rather, we have documented a situation where the Workers’ Party of Korea enforces the absolute denial of religious belief through the active mobilization of the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of People’s Security, the Prosecutor’s Office, and multiple organizational units, among other mechanisms, that govern the daily lives of citizens. The effectiveness and scale of this persecution discloses the significant financial, organizational, and human resources that the North Korean government devotes to maintaining the supremacy of its political ideology and the Kim family. This reality and the centralization of religious and belief persecution offers opportunities for the international community to pursue justice, accountability, and behavior modification where persons and organizations responsible for documented religious freedom violations can be identified.

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