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CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN NORTH KOREA

„If you want to trust in a deity, trust the deity of Korea!”

Kim Il-Sung

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) is one of the most repressive dictatorships in the world, which does not provide its citizens with even minimal level of freedom of religion. The system is harder against Christians than to other religions, and the country is usually international rankings on the extent of the persecution of Christians. Although the freedom of religion is enshrined in the country’s constitution, it is not respected in practice. At the same time, Christianity is affected by the anti-religious communist traditions of the North Korean regime. According to the nationalist state ideology, Christians are a foreign element in the country, and the religious cult of the Kim family, which leaves no room for other beliefs. When young Kim Jong-un (1984-) came to power and the country’s diplomatic activity intensified in 2018, many hoped that the situation of the North Korean population would improve, the country’s isolation from the world would ease, which would be beneficial for Christians. So far we have not seen any positive change and there is no indication that repression will ease in the future.

Methodological problems

It is a serious problem when examining the situation of Christianity in North Korea that we do not have reliable sources at all. The authorities in Pyongyang do not publish much information on the number of believers, their composition or about any religious issues. Even if such official statements were made the very nature of the system would make this data incredible. Missionaries, who are primarily South Korean, who have credible information about North Korean Christianity do not share this information with anyone to protect

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their flock'. Foreigners who visit the capital sometimes report that there are some churches there. But there is a strong suspicion that the main purpose of these churches exists to deceive the international public, and not to enable ordinary North Koreans to practice their beliefs. Most of the information we possess comes from North Korean refugees, but we have to ask how well do they represent the country's society. How much information do they possess about processes which happen inside the DPRK? Do they tell the truth or they simply adjust their accounts to our perceived or real expectations? And finally, we have to examine the influence of South Korean governmental bodies on their accounts since Seoul has a clear interest in portraying the DPRK as negative colours as possible. International organizations or experts cannot carry out substantive investigations in-country, therefore the most official reports rely primarily on the personal accounts of the northern refugees.

Because of the above-mentioned facts, we can not get an accurate estimate of the number of Christians living in the DPRK, the persecution they have to endure and any possible trends. However, all the information we possess points in the direction that the Christians of North Korea have to live tragic circumstance under a system which is extremely hostile to religion, where authorities regularly deploy multiple methods to prevent the rise or practice of Christianity.

Historical background

The first Christian documents reached the Korean peninsula from China in the 17th century, but missionary activity was severely restricted by the Hermit Kingdom of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). In the 18th–19th century, the Christian religion was banned multiple times, and those who converted to Christianity were persecuted by the state. The most significant anti-Christianity campaign took place in 1866 when about eight thousand Catholics were killed. As a result of these persecutions, Korea gave so many saints to the Catholic Church that the country occupies the fourth place on the list which ranks countries according to how many saints did they “produce.” (PECKNOLD 2013)

From the end of the 19th century, when Western countries forced Korea to open its gates, a new period started for Christianity. Since after this change, Christian missionaries could finally operate openly in the country. So soon Protestant and Catholic missionaries established modern education and health care institutions in the country, and played an important role in the development of Korea. Schools, in particular, played a major role, since the children of the Korean elite, in the 20th century, studied in Christian institutions. Similarly to his parents, relatives and childhood friends Kim Il-Sung (1912–1994) also grew up as a Christian,

who attended church services, and the future communist leader also volunteered as a Sunday school teacher. (RYU 2019, 1–5)

The Japanese colonial rule between 1910 and 1945 was important for this community since many Korean Christians participated in the national independence movement. Some Christian intellectuals participated in anti-Japanese activities, other Christians refused to attend Shinto ceremonies, while some did surrender to the Japanese. (HAN 2017, 2–3) Christianity was especially widespread in the more industrialized and urbanized northern part of the country, and at the time Pyongyang was sometimes referred to as the “Jerusalem of the East.” When the Japanese left in 1945 about 2–3% of the population was Christian. An official statement from 1950 mentioned that about 200,000 Protestants and 57,000 Catholics lived in Korea (COLLINS 2012, 78). However, the ratio of Christians was much larger amongst the more educated and influential groups of the country. As a result, Christians had a much larger influence on Korean society, economy, and politics than what their percentage might predict.

After the Second World War, the peninsula was divided into two zones of occupation which were occupied by the Soviets and Americans. Within a few years, these zones were transformed into two new states, the Republic of Korea in the south and the DPRK in the north. After the Korean War (1950-53), partially due to American influence, Christianity became even more popular in South Korea, as many associated Christianity with modernization and Westernization. This belief was supported by the fact that Christian denominations have established nearly 300 schools and 40 universities in Korea. (GRAYSON 2002, 169; HAN 2017, 5–6) Currently, according to the 2015 South Korean census more than a quarter of the population of the Republic of Korea was Christian, 19.7% are Protestant and 7.9% Catholic. (STATISTICS KOREA, 2016) South Korean Christians are extremely active missionaries at home and abroad, and after the US, South Korea sends the second-most missionaries in the world. Their zeal might make the North Korean regime even more hostile towards Christianity.

In the northern part of the peninsula, where Christianity was originally much stronger than in the south (PARK 2013, 28–29), the support of the Soviet Union turned Kim Il-Sung’s Korean Workers Party into a dominant political force within the Soviet zone of occupation. Finally, in 1948 Kim Il-Sung proclaimed the birth of a new state, the DPRK. For Christianity, these years were characterized by an interesting duality. On the one hand, the Korean Labor Party was a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party, and as such its ideology from the outset was anti-religious and anti-Christian. Since most North Korean Christians were landowners, well-off peasants, and city dwellers, they were amongst the first targets of the new regime. Most of them emigrated to South Korea after they had been deprived of their livelihoods during the 1946 land reform and

nationalization campaign. The fate of Northern Christians worsened when a significant number of them openly opposed the new order, by boycotting the 1946 elections, which was held on a Sunday and many polling stations were located in churches. (RYU 2019, 407–411) As a result, in the early years of the DPRK, the new authorities actively targeted Christians and followers of other religions, by launching multiple campaigns against superstitions and ordering the arrest of many church leaders. (WON 2011, 90)

On the other hand, the situation in North Korea differed from European Communist countries and China in one key aspect. In Korea, Christianity did not have any connections with the overthrown regime. Instead, Christianity had strong ties with anti-Japanese resistance groups which the new regime has always classified as progressive and national. The participation of Christians in patriotic movements was undeniable. For this reason, at least in official rhetoric, Christians were not classified as *ab ovo* enemies of the regime to be exterminated, they had groups the regime found worthy of being integrated into the new system. (WON 2011 88–89)

During the transitional period, Kim Il-Sung wanted to create a united front organisation which contained the representatives of every progressive force including some, properly controlled, representatives of various religions. One of the remnants of this era is the Chondoist Chongu Party, which was founded in 1946. The party, which is one of the three legal political parties in the DPRK, and its representatives take part in the work of Supreme People's Congress, which is the North Korean legislature. The party originally represented the followers of the Religion of the Heavenly Way, which religion combines the teachings of 19th-century Korean neo-Confucian peasant movements with some Shamanistic elements.

Some Christian personalities also took part in the activities of the “neo-democratic”, “anti-imperialist”, “anti-feudalistic” united front. The most important character from of these people was Kang Ryang-uk (1902-1983) a Presbyterian pastor, who was also Kim Il-Sung's maternal uncle. He was the founder of the Korean Christian Federation of Protestants (KCFP) in 1946, and later, while he was still the president of the KCFP, he first held the posts of the secretary of the Supreme People's Assembly, and then he became the deputy prime minister of the DPRK, nominally the second man in the country. His son Kang Yong Sop (1931-2012), who was a pastor like his father, also held many important government positions and, over time, he replaced his father as president of the KCFP too. (WEINGARTNER 2012) Their careers highlight the contradictions of North Korean Christianity: while the party was persecuting most North Korean Christians, yet a Protestant minister could remain an influential member of the Kim family and occupy important government positions, for example, being Kim Il-Sung's ambassador in Ceaușescu's Romania.

Thus, during the post World War II transition period, similarly to other communist countries, the existence of some Christian personalities and organizations were tolerated by the regime which merged these bodies into

a Communist-dominated people's front organisation: once within the people's front these actors establishing new official Christian organizations, which were lead by credible people. The continued existence of these organizations helps to convince the outside world that religious freedom is possible within the DPRK. Furthermore, the existence of these officially approved churches enables contacts with foreign churches, which is closely monitored by the regime. In practice, apart from these front organizations, every other Christian community have been systematically destroyed, which was made not as difficult as it might have been since large numbers of Christians fled to the south before the creation of the DPRK.

In the few years after 1948, some regime friendly Christian organizations could still work, and the freedom of religion was enshrined in the country's first constitution. It is worth noting that the DPRK's first constitution did not mention the freedom of anti-religious propaganda which appeared in the Soviet constitution, which was the template for the North Korean constitution. (RYU 2019, 413) However, as early as 1949, the party launched multiple anti-religious campaigns, nationalised church schools, and ordered the arrest of the remaining independent church leaders. A large number of captured Christians were subsequently executed.

The Korean War (1950–1953) made religious life completely impossible. During the fighting, many temples and churches were destroyed, and the commitment of many Christians' was weakened when those Americans were bombing their buildings, which were often crowded with refugees there, who have spread Christianity in Korea in the previous decades. (RYU 2019, 415) The war caused another wave of migration towards the south so the exodus of Christians from the DPRK continued. Meanwhile, Pyongyang also initiated a new propaganda campaign which targeted Americans and other Christian missionaries who allegedly committed many atrocities, massacres and other crimes against humanity. During the war, the communist also launched large scale purges against anyone who might have had American contacts which automatically turned them into the enemies of the regime. These people were arrested by North Korean state security services and a lot of them were executed. In many cases, retreating northern troops massacred suspicious people like Christian leaders. According to some sources, 350 priests and pastors were murdered or arrested during the Korean War. By the end of the war, only 20 pastors remained in North Korea, for the 50,000 Protestant believers. (WON 2011, 92–93) Some pro-regime Christian personalities and organizations supported Kim Il-Sung during the war, but public religious activity disappeared once the war was over.

After the war, North Korean entered the period of a socialist revolution (1953–1972) which led to the establishment and consolidation of the Kim regime. Churches and religious institutions were omitted from the post-war reconstruction plans and the DPRK started to systematically remove religion from their country. (PARK 2013, 30) However, until about 1958, the year when they announced the socialist transformation of production

conditions, the “religious people” phrase regularly appeared in Kim Il-Sung’s speeches and other political documents as one of those forces which are work for the success of the socialist revolution in the DPRK. (RYU 2019, 419) Subsequently, believers were never mentioned in such a positive context, and the term religion was only used in a negative context, and the party launched multiple campaigns to destroy religions. (WON 2011, 94)

From the 1960s onwards, they focused on the development of *Juche*, which is an all-encompassing universal ideology, the guiding principle for all actions, to be pursued by all, that left no room for religious practice. In 1967, apparently under the influence of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the DPRK started another campaign against the enemies of the regime, which contained a strong anti-religious component. (RYU 2019, 419–420) This was the period when they fully developed the current Songbun system. The Songbun system classifies citizens into three main categories (friendly, volatile and hostile) and 51 subcategories exist within these three large classes. The classification system uses multiple factors like an ancestor’s social status before the liberation, so somebody’s pre-war status also influences the fate of their descendants. The categorisation of a person is extremely important which influences what type of jobs can someone do, how much food they get, who can they marry, are eligible for party membership, what schools they may attend, and so on. (COLLINS 2012; WON 2011, 95)

Religious people, or more specifically those whose ancestors were considered religious, were placed in the lowest, hostile category, into special Protestant (37) and Catholic (39) sub-categories. According to Philo Kim, who is an expert in this field, 900 Protestant pastors and 300,000 believers were either killed or forced into apostasy when the system was introduced. According to Philo 260 Catholic priests and nuns and 50,000 laymen had to go through the same process and suffered the same fate. (COLLINS 2012, 80) It cannot be excluded that these numbers are exaggerated because these numbers seem higher than the total number of Christians in the country. Nevertheless, the remaining Christians are certainly at the bottom of the social hierarchy, not just because they are under constant close supervision, but they are forced to live the most backward districts of the country.

In 1972, a new era began in the DPRK, when the state adopted a new socialist constitution. This implies that by 1972 the socialist transformation was complete, and in this new era, the country was ready to work for the complete victory of socialism. The constitution enshrined the central role of the *Juche* ideology and Kim Il-Sungism. By the 1970s Kim Il-Sung was revered as the great leader of the country with unlimited powers which was supported by a cult of personality. The new constitution guarantees the freedom of religious belief, but it also contains the freedom of anti-religious propaganda. Articles and films frequently criticized Christians. These attacks involved standard anti-American and Marxist panels like that religion is “opium of the people,” and homegrown criticism based upon the human-centric nature of *Juche* ideology. (RYU 2019, 422–423) The

reason for the renewed anti-religious sentiments was probably not because religions were still a major anti-regime force in North Korea, but that the regime was already planning the invasion of South Korea and was getting ready to deal with the sizable religious communities there.

In the 1980s, religion-related rhetoric once again began to change, which was possibly motivated by external factors. By then, South Korea became much more developed and richer than the North, which weakened the position of the DPRK. This situation turned into a full-scale crisis when the communist block collapsed in the second half of the decade. The increasingly isolated regime started using properly controlled Christianity as a tool to build links with West, thereby counteracting the loss of its allies. So in 1988, when the country was getting ready to host for the 1989 World Youth Festival they quickly built two new churches in Pyongyang, the Protestant Bongsu Church and Catholic Zhangung Church. Official religious organizations that had been inactive for decades restarted their activities, and in 1990 the Supreme People's Congress had six religious representatives. (WON 2011, 97)

This new policy also appeared in Kim Il-Sung's memoirs, published in 1992, which portrays several patriotic Christians quite positively without even the hint of anti-Christian feeling. (KIM 1992) In 1992, the Korean Christian Federation and the Korean Catholic Association invited Billy Graham, the famous American evangelist, to preach at Bongsu Temple who also personally deliver US President Bill Clinton's letter to Kim Il-Sung. (RYU 2019, 427) Later, Graham's son and wife also visited the country, and representatives of other Christian organizations have regularly visited North Korea since then, where they are often greeted with state grandeur. The leaders of North Korea's official Christian organizations regularly attend many international conferences and events. During the famine of the 1990s, the DPRK was in dire need of humanitarian assistance from abroad so many South Korean Christian communities were actively raising funds for their northern brethren and many religious organizations provide humanitarian aid to North Korea.

According to foreign experts, this new religious policy is free from honest religious content. They simply built these churches to deceive foreigners since the believers who attend the ceremonies in these buildings are centrally assigned cadres, the pastors are public servants, and Christian federations are part of the totalitarian state bureaucracy. Furthermore, the existence of these Potemkin-churches did not alleviate the hardship of real Christians who are still persecuted by the North Korean state. (WON 2011, 97–98) The fact that some foreign Christians can enter the DPRK is part of a clever international game played by the Kim regime to preserve the regime, and Christian organizations provide a decent amount of vital aid which keeps the regime alive. In the spirit of this policy, some Christian aid organizations have permission to operate in North Korea, but they are not allowed to carry out any activities of a missionary nature. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 10)

The leaders in Pyongyang manage Christian charities with ease, they open up the country to foreign Christian organizations in milder periods, but then suddenly withdraw these concessions in more tense times. This clever policy is best illustrated through the story of a foreign Christian university in the northern capital. The Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), is sole private university in the DPRK. This university was established in 2010 after Kim Jong-il (1941–2011) approved a proposal by South Korean, American and other Christian organizations to set up a private Christian university in Pyongyang. University teachers must not allowed to engage in public religious activities or talk about religion at all, and their students are children of the North Korean party elite, but it is a sign of openness to allow Christian teachers to live and teach in Pyongyang. (KIM 2014) However, the university is vulnerable to changes in international politics. For example, in 2017, when tensions between DPRK and the Western powers were extremely high, two foreign university instructors were suddenly arrested on charges of crimes against the state and they were only released a year later when the globe was getting ready for the first-ever North Korean – American summit. (SHARMA 2018)

Ideological background

After outlining the historical background, we have to examine those ideological factors which influence the DPRK's attitude towards Christians. Regardless of current political events and interests, they are constantly present and can be expected to persist in the long term.

- Marxism is fundamentally atheistic, and Kim Il-Sung built his state on an extremely strict Stalinism. But by 2019 Marxism-Leninism has now been replaced with the indigenous *Juche* ideology, and in 2009 they removed every reference to communism from the DPRK's constitution (USCIRF 2019, 67). However, this has not changed the atheistic and anti-religious nature of the system.
- The *Juche* ('self-reliance') ideology which was conceived by Kim Il-Sung from the mid-1950s, formalized in the 1960s, and finalized by Kim Jong-il in the 1980s. This ideology emphasizes political and economic independence, the ability of the military to defend the country from aggression. According to JUCHE historical processes are influenced by human beings who can of shaping their environment, and not objective laws like production conditions and certainly not by some kind of deities. Because of its human-centeredness, *Juche* is opposed to every religion. (DPRK, year not specified)

- Contrary to the original teachings of Marxism, *Juche* states that the masses of people cannot organize themselves, they need a “great leader” (*suryong*) who can successfully lead the masses. Obviously, this leader was Kim Il-Sung whose cult is still the strongest in the country. However, after his death, his descendants, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, have also been surrounded by extensive personality cults. Their pictures appear in Korean homes, workplaces and public spaces, their birthdays are public holidays, and countless institutions and public spaces are named after them. *Juche* was originally an atheistic and materialistic ideology, but after Kim Il-Sung’s death, some quasi-religious elements have been introduced into *Juche*. (USCIRF 2019, 67) The founder of the state has been proclaimed as the perpetual president of the country and he is essentially worshipped as a god. They have been established pilgrimage centres at the most important places of his life, which are holy places within *Juche*. Official announcements never mention he died, they simply say that he “left his people.” A peculiar order of rituals have been established, his works have been canonized, and the desecration of his image is a serious crime. (UN HRC COI 2014, 7) The cult which surrounds the Kim family is, of course, incompatible with any notion that there is another power over man. Thus, the Christian concept of God is also unacceptable, you can not be loyal to any other person than those who belong to the “Paektu bloodline”, that is, Kim Il-Sung and his descendants.
- Similarly to other communist dictatorships, the North Korean party-state also does not tolerate the existence of those relationships and communities which are outside the party’s total control and because such groups can be used as cover by resistance groups or anti-state conspirators. Therefore, the existence of independent Christian communities is also unacceptable.
- Christianity is handicapped by its foreign origins if we compare it with other indigenous or traditional Korean religions. Moreover, the DPRK has always been suspicious over the presence of foreign powers and organizations in North Korea, so they elevated *Juche* to the level of state ideology. The situation of Christianity was exacerbated by the fact that most Protestant missionaries in Korea were American, the representatives of the very country which had become North Korea’s fiercest enemy since the Korean War. And since the 1950s the DPRK treats anyone who has ever associated with Americans as a hostile person, and the diplomatic detente of the last few years has not changed this approach yet. (ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 2)
- Because Christianity is extremely successful in South Korea and the South Koreans are doing very extensive missionary activities, North Korea is worried that Christianity may serve as a vehicle of South Korean conquest, a spiritual ideological preparatory strike before a South-led unification. That is why northern authorities pay particular attention to it.

These ideological factors are fundamental components of the system and ensure that as long as the Kim regime survives, the position of Christians in North Korea will not improve significantly. Some temporary mellowing may occur for tactical reasons, but the current DPRK regime is incompatible with Christianity, and free religious practice within a state governed by *Juche* is unthinkable.

Christians in today's North Korea

The DPRK's current constitution – just like previous versions - contains a clause guaranteeing freedom of religion. Article 68 reads: "Citizens shall be entitled to the freedom of religion. Based on this right, they can build religious buildings and hold religious ceremonies. Religion must not be used as a pretext for engaging with foreign forces or endangering public or social order." (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 3) As we have seen, even the passage of their constitution which guarantees religious freedom indicates a statement which proves that DPRK sees religion as a potential threat and a tool in the hands of foreign forces. The North Korean Criminal Code explicitly prohibits the possession of foreign religious material. (USCIRF 2019, 67, US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 3)

in principle, freedom of religion is guaranteed by an international commitment, as the DPRK ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1981. International organizations dealing with the issue regularly state that the DPRK regularly violates the provisions of its own constitution, and the country's international commitments and religious freedom in North Korea is severely restricted. (ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 1)

It is hard to quantify how many Christians live in North Korea. According to international observers, this number is somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000, but these do not explain the sources behind their estimates. Some sources also add that about 50,000–70,000 thousand Christians are kept in labour camps, but once again this information is not supported by any reliable source or sources. (ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 2) Since the vast majority of Christians in North Korea can only practice their religion in secret, so obviously the authorities do not even know the actual number of believers, and even if they have an estimate, they will not disclose it with the world. The sole concrete piece of evidence is about how many people belonged to the official religious organizations. According to a more than 10-year-old government press release, there were 3,000 Catholics in North Korea, while the Korean Catholic Association itself told that it had about 800 believers (ALLEN 2006). While the Korean Christian Association, which is the official Protestant organisation of the

country, had about 10,000 North Korean Protestant members. (TAN 2015, 73) According to research done by a South Korean priest, the one only Catholic church in the north had about 3,000 believers. (USCIRF 2019, 69) However, we can not verify these numbers. A 2002 United Nations report put the number of Christians in North Korea between 200 and 400 thousand (USCIRF 2019, 67), and the UN has not published an updated estimate. South Korean religious organizations may have access to better estimates, but they do not disclose such information for understandable security reasons.

The North Korean authorities usually take foreigners to visit one of the five Christian churches in Pyongyang. These are Bongsu, Chilgol, Jeil (Protestants), Changchung (Catholic) and the Holy Trinity (Orthodox). The latter is the newest church in the city, built by in the 2000s, to serve the pastoral needs of Russians who live and work in Pyongyang. The church, which the North Koreans describe as a Catholic Church, has no connection with the Holy See (USCIRF 2019, 69; US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 8) which has been the case since the disappearance of last Bishop of Pyongyang in 1962. Ever since North Korean Catholics have, in principle, been under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Seoul, but this is of course just a bureaucratic position. (ALLEN 2006) The Chilgol Temple is dedicated to the memory of Kim Il-Sung's mother, who was a Presbyterian deaconess. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 7) All foreign sources assume that these temples just exist to serve the regime's propaganda purposes, the ceremonies performed there are fake, that their believers who attend these services are simply doing a job. We, of course, can not prove or disprove these claims, but the nature of the system suggests that these suspicions are probably true. (McKAY 2017; ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 2; US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 7) We have to emphasize that there are other churches in the country besides the five churches in the capital and that the official churches can only operate in Pyongyang. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 7) In 2002, the Pyongyang government reported to the UN that there were 500 "family prayer houses" in the country, but none of the tens of thousands of North Korean refugees has ever known about the existence of these alleged family prayer houses. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 8)

Legal religious activities can only be performed under the auspices of the officially recognized religious organizations. All of them are affiliated with the United Front of the Workers Party of Korea, which is the state party, and it is questionable whether they are really religious organizations or they simply exist to fulfil a political function. These include the Korean Christian Alliance and the Korean Catholic Alliance, but there is a separate alliance for the Buddhists as well while chondoism has its own party. These associations play an important role in the DPRK's international relations, as they can have access to certain channels which are not open to government agencies. The role of these associations is also important in enabling the flow of foreign aid from religious charities into the country. These organizations also train future religious workers, and they run

religious study programs at Kim Il-Sung University. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 9) There is no information about the content of these training projects.

The religious life of non-official Christians, including everyone who lives outside Pyongyang, can only be captured through the accounts of refugees. Various organizations carry out many surveys, make interviews with those who have left the country, and ask about the experiences on religious life from those who have come from North Korea to South Korea or China. To protect relatives who remain at home, these statements contain little specific information, but virtually all of the accounts share the features described below:

- Religious freedom is not a thing in the country, 99.6% of 12,625 refugees who were questioned between 2007–2018 refugees believed this to be the case. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 6)
- There are no churches, no communal worship or prayer are allowed. The practice of Christianity is only possible on an individual or family basis. There are rumours about is a network of underground Christian communities throughout the country which operates in covert churches, but the existence of such groups has not been confirmed by rural refugees while the people of Pyongyang have only hearsay evidence about the existence. (USCIRF 2019, 68)
- Parents do not talk to their children about their Christian faith, or they only do so when they reach a certain age because a child might denounce the parents' religious convictions to the authorities. At the same time, we are aware of some cases when Christian faith has survived for generations within families. (PARK 2013, 31)
- It is strictly forbidden to own or smuggle a Bible North Korea, so believers often keep split up their Bibles into multiple pieces. Many prayers and hymns are memorized. (PARK 2013, 30–31)
- If someone is arrested for participation in group prayer, for the possession of a Bible or other similar religious object, he/she has to face the most severe penalties. This can include some time in a prison or labour camp, they have several kinds of camps or even execution. (McKAY 2017; USCIRF 2019, 66; ADF INTERNATIONAL, 2019, 3, UN HRC COI 2014, 7)
- It is also forbidden to make contact with foreign religious persons or listen to religious radio broadcasts from South Korea. (USCIRF 2019, 68)
- North Korea also metes out collective punishment so if somebody has been caught committing a religious offence his whole family will be severely punished, even if they are not Christians. (ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 2; USCIRF 2019, 68)
- There is an extensive system of agents who work to uncover Christian activity. Furthermore, and neighbours and family members are encouraged to keep an eye on each other and report any suspicious activities. For this reason, Christians must exercise extreme caution. (USCIRF 2019, 68, UN HRC COI 2014, 7)

There are about 80,000–12,000 political prisoners in North Korean labour camps, according to some estimates around 50,000 people are there because of their Christian beliefs. Workers in labour camps are tortured, and they have to deal with starvation and arbitrary executions. (USCIRF 2019, 66, 68) According to certain estimates, about 75% of Christians do not survive the camps. (ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 3)

We cannot ignore the Christian communities of Northeast China are vital if we talk about North Korean Christianity because two million Chinese citizens of Korean descent, hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees and many South Korean businessmen live in this area, primarily in the Korean Autonomous Region of Jilin, Jienpien province. In this region, which is not far from the China-North Korea border and they have close links with neighbouring Korean provinces. These links include people smuggling and migration across the China-North Korea border, which border is not closed for those who know how to cross it. For many south Korean Christian organizations, which are extremely active in missionary work, the conversion North Koreans living in Northern China is a priority, so many South Korean missionaries are active in this area (PARK 2013, 32; US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019,11). This area is the first stop on the northern migration route towards South Korea and Christians do a lot to help North Korean refugees Northern China. Many northern refugees convert to Christianity here, and according to some sources, 88% of them declare themselves as Christian when they arrive in the South. (PARK, 2013, 32) Border traffic is two-way street since, alongside Chinese consumer goods and elements of South Korean pop culture, many religious materials like Bibles also reach North Korea from Northeast China. This means that Northeast China plays a key role in the evangelisation of North Korea. Many of the refugees in China will return to North Korea and through them, Christianity also infiltrates the country. Of course, due to the illegal nature of the process, makes it hard to quantify the importance of this process, Nevertheless, it seems quite likely that the Pyongyang regime sees this cross border activity as a serious security threat. This is illustrated, for example, by the brutal assassination of a Chinese-Korean minister in 2016, possibly by the North Korean secret service (KIM-SHIN 2018), and according to a source, in recent years no fewer than ten pastors died in mysterious circumstances in Northeastern China. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 10)

Developments under Kim Jong-un

When Kim Jong-il died in 2011 and was replaced by his son, the young Kim Jong-un, many in the West hoped that the new leader would pursue a more moderate policy than his predecessors. This was partially based on the fact that Kim Jong-un had once studied in a Swiss private school, so people expected that he would be more open

towards Western ideas. The hopes turned out to be unfounded and there was no significant change in North Korea's domestic and foreign policy. The only changes were temporary, an occasional appearance of Mickey Mouse in a Pyongyang show or Kim's meetings with Dennis Rodman. Kim also restarted North Korea's dormant nuclear program which increased the country's isolation and then from 2018, there was a sudden flurry of diplomatic activity when he met the US, Chinese, South Korean and Russian Presidents. Experts also believe that the situation of North Korean citizens has not changed much. This also applies to Christians: although the official Christian organizations participated in the diplomatic process, we do not know whether the circumstances of Christians improved under Kim Jong-un. In a 2018 survey, North Korean refugees and other well-informed whistleblowers were asked whether the situation of believers had improved or deteriorated compared to 2007. The results were quite interesting 24% reported deterioration, 13% unchanged condition, 6% felt that they had more freedom than earlier, while 57% were unable to respond. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 3)

The situation of religious freedom in North Korea is regularly reviewed by various international organizations, and it is widely believed that the situation has not improved under Kim Jong-un.

In 2013–2014, the UN Human Rights Council set up a Commission of Inquiry to carry out an extensive investigation into the human rights situation in North Korea, and their report revealed a total lack of religious freedom. (UN HRC COI 2014, 7) As a result of this report, the UN General Assembly in December 2014 condemned “long-standing and still serious human rights violations in the DPRK”, which includes “death penalty for political or religious offences.” (UN GA 2014, 4)

Each year the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) publishes a comprehensive report on the state of religious freedom in many troubled countries, with a separate chapter devoted to the DPRK. As in previous years' reports, the 2019 document, which summarizes developments in the previous year, states that apart from the five official churches, religion can only be practised in secret, persons who are caught conducting religious activities have face severe punishment, arrest, torture, labour camp, execution, and in 2018, the North Korean regime continued “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion.” (USCIRF 2019, 66–71) According to the report, there are 80,000–120,000 thousand political prisoners in the country, of whom 50,000 are Christians, who are treated with particular cruelty. The earliest USCIRF report available dates from 2006, this and all annual documents published since, contain the same findings.

The US State Department's recent Religious Freedom Report 2018 reveals similar findings. The document refers to information from a South Korean organization saying that, between March 2007 and March 2018, there were 1,341 cases of violation of religious freedom in the DPRK, including 120 executions, 90 disappearances and 48 physical assaults. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, I, 4)

Each year, the US classifies the DPRK as a “country of particular concern” (COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN, CPC) for violating religious freedom. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019, 2.)

Many appreciated that in October 2018, Kim Jong-un invited Pope Francis to North Korea. (USCIRF, 2019, p. 69) If the Holy Father accepts the invitation, it would be the first papal visit to the DPRK, but for the ideological-political reasons listed above, it is questionable whether this gesture would improve the position of believers.

The North Korean government’s anti-Christian actions affect not only North Korean citizens but also, at times, foreigners operating within the DPRK or not far from the North Korean border. In recent years, the following cases have been reported in the international press:

- In 2014, a China-based pastor named Jang Moon Seok was kidnapped by the Pyongyang State Security Department to the DPRK, where he was sentenced to 15 years in a labour camp. Three of his associates were publicly executed in 2015.
- In 2015, Canadian-born Hyeon Soo Lim, who was on a humanitarian mission, was sentenced to life imprisonment on the charge of trying to overthrow the regime with the help of religion. In 2017, he was released due to his state of health. (LING – BARTON 2017; ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 3)
- In 2015, a Korean-American pastor named Kim Dong-chul was charged with espionage for South Korea and sentenced to ten years of forced labour. He was released in 2018 ahead of the US-North Korea Summit. (JI 2018)
- In 2016, Han Chung-ryeol, a Chinese national who was helping North Korean refugees on the Chinese side of the North Korea – China border, left his church to answer a phone call and was brutally murdered. Later, the North Korean authorities announced that one of Han’s deacons had been sentenced to 15 years of forced labour. (KIM–SHIH 2018; VOICE OF THE MARTYRS 2017; ADF INTERNATIONAL 2019, 3)
- In 2017, two faculty members of Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, which is founded by foreign Christian organizations, were arrested and convicted on various charges. They were released before the US-North Korea Summit in 2018. (SHARMA 2018)

In the examples above, every victim was a foreigner, so their names and fates are known and publicised. Furthermore, citizens of Western countries may be released from captivity after a political bargain. On the other hand, many North Korean refugees reported the conviction, harassment and murder of North Korean Christians - who cannot hope in such a positive outcome. Witness testimonies often do not contain specific details, because that could unmask the informant, which could threaten the safety of their relatives who still live in North Korea. Therefore, most of these martyrs will forever remain anonymous.

Summary

Despite the lack of reliable primary sources, we clearly stated that the DPRK is one of those countries in the world which persecutes Christianity most ruthlessly, where people who practise Christianity outside the confines of official organizations which collaborate with the regime is severely prosecuted. The persecution of North Korean Christians began before the DPRK has even been founded in 1948 and has been continued ever since. Although the North Korean government relaunched official Christian organizations in the 1980s and allowed the construction of some churches yet this did not indicate a major change in the religious policies of the DPRK. These steps were simple opportunistic moves to illustrate that religious freedom exists in the DPRK and to open secondary channels for diplomacy and receive aid from non-governmental sources. The constitution, on paper, guarantees freedom of religion, but it is a simple lie. The regime sees Christianity as a serious threat, because religious faith may undermine both the cult of the Kim family and the exclusivity within *Juche* ideology. Furthermore, the North Koreans are probably worried that Christianity might be a tool to increase American and South Korean influence in North Korea. Not surprisingly practising Christian belief is sometimes punished by the death penalty.

The situation of Christians has not improved much either when Kim Jong-un became North Korea's new leader in 2011 and nor when the DPRK's launched its diplomatic offensive in 2018. Since eyewitnesses still talk about the regular abuse of believers. The *songbun* system still places the descendants of Christians at the bottom of the social hierarchy and accordingly provides them with very limited opportunities since they belong to a social class which is hostile towards the regime. Nonetheless, Christianity in general, and Protestantism particular has not disappeared from North Korea, and there is also a continuous illegal religious missionary through Northeast China.

In North Korea, we can not expect any political and social reforms which would make the situation of Christians more bearable, since the North Korean leadership greatest worry is that any loosening would lead to the collapse of the regime. As a result, apart from some spectacular gestures which they do for some instantaneous political or material gain, it is unlikely that the life of Christians in North Korea will be substantially better in the future compared to their current living conditions.

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