

# **REPUBLIC OF KOREA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for religious freedom and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government continued to imprison approximately 600 conscientious objectors to mandatory military service, the majority of whom refuse military service for religious reasons. On August 19, the Supreme Court rejected the final appeal of a December 2013 case filed by 50 individuals who had sought compensation for imprisonment as conscientious objectors.

Religious leaders met regularly to promote interreligious harmony.

U.S. embassy officials discussed issues related to religious freedom, including the jailing of conscientious objectors, with the government and religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 49.1 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a 2010 survey, approximately 24 percent of the population is Buddhist; 24 percent Protestant; 8 percent Roman Catholic; and 43 percent professes no religious belief. Followers of all other religious groups, including Won Buddhism, Confucianism, Jeongsando, Cheondogyo, Daejonggyo, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventist Church, Daesun Jinrihoe, the Unification Church, and Islam together constitute less than 1 percent of the population. There is a small Jewish population consisting almost entirely of expatriates. The Muslim population is estimated at 135,000, with approximately 100,000 consisting of expatriates and migrant workers.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution and other laws state that all citizens have freedom of religion and that there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, social, or cultural life on account of religion. The constitution states that religion and state shall be separate. The Religious Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and

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Tourism is charged with promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding by supporting collaborative activities across various religions.

The law requires military service for virtually all male citizens between the ages of 20 and 30. Military service lasts between 21 and 24 months, depending on the branch of service. The law does not allow for alternative service or conscientious objectors, who may receive a maximum three-year prison sentence for refraining from service. Conscientious objectors sentenced to more than 18 months in prison are exempt from further military service and reserve duty obligations, and are not subject to further fines or other punishment.

Those who complete their military service obligation and subsequently become conscientious objectors are subject to fines for not participating in mandatory reserve-duty exercises. Reserve-duty obligation lasts for eight years, and there are several reserve-duty exercises per year. The fines vary depending on jurisdiction but typically average 200,000 Korean won (KRW) (\$170) for the first conviction. Fines increase by KRW 100,000-300,000 (\$85-255) for each subsequent conviction. The law puts a ceiling on the fine at KRW two million (\$1,700) per conviction. Courts have the option, in lieu of levying fines, to sentence individuals deemed to be habitual offenders to prison terms or suspended prison terms that range from one day to three years.

The government does not require religious groups or foreign religious workers to register or obtain licenses. Organizations can voluntarily submit documentation verifying religious activity for tax benefits.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Private schools are free to conduct religious activities.

The preservation law provides government subsidies to historic cultural properties, including Buddhist temples, for their preservation and upkeep.

### **Government Practices**

The government detained and imprisoned conscientious objectors to military service. Most conscientious objectors refused military service for religious reasons. The courts sentenced most conscientious objectors to 18 months in prison. While absolved of any additional military commitment, after serving time in prison conscientious objectors have a criminal record that could affect future

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employment opportunities, including limitations on holding public office or working as a public servant. Watchtower International, a Jehovah's Witnesses-affiliated nongovernmental organization (NGO), reported, as of August 30, there were 542 Jehovah's Witnesses in prison for conscientious objection to military service, including 50 pending trial, with an additional 231 persons on trial without detention. The total number of cases (823) was higher than the 789 cases in 2014.

In May and August district courts in Gwangju and Suwon found six Jehovah's Witnesses conscientious objectors not guilty of violating the Military Service Act. In November under prosecutorial appeal, one case in Gwangju was overturned and the defendant was found guilty. The defendant appealed to the Supreme Court. The five other cases remained under prosecutorial appeal with the district courts.

Watchtower International estimated that since 1950, 18,550 conscientious objectors have served prison time in South Korea.

On August 19, the Supreme Court rejected the final appeal of a December 2013 complaint filed by 50 individuals who had been imprisoned as conscientious objectors and sought compensation.

The Korean Falun Dafa Association stated the government repeatedly interfered with Falun Gong-affiliated performance troupe Shen Yun's attempts to reserve public venues for their commercial performances. The Korean Falun Dafa Association said that Shen Yun was not able to secure appropriately-sized venues and did not perform in Seoul during the year as a result.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

As of October the National Human Rights Commission reported five cases alleging religious discrimination in the workplace. In one case, a supervisor asked a Muslim woman to remove her hijab at work. The case was settled with counseling and an apology from the supervisor.

Samsung conglomerate subsidiary Samsung C&T briefly posted remarks and cartoons on its public website in July that some interpreted to be anti-Semitic. The remarks and statements were posted while Elliott Management, a Samsung C&T minority stakeholder with a Jewish CEO, was contesting a proposed merger

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between Samsung C&T and Cheil Industries. Samsung removed the remarks and cartoons within one week, and issued a statement condemning anti-Semitism.

Prominent religious leaders regularly met together privately and under government auspices to promote religious freedom, mutual understanding, and tolerance. The Korean Conference of Religions for Peace hosted religious leaders from multiple faiths at religious events throughout the year, including seminars, exhibitions, arts and cultural performances, and interfaith exchanges to promote religious freedom, reconciliation, and coexistence among religions. It reportedly held an interfaith conference with North Korean religious counterparts in North Korea in November. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism supported these events with at least 440 million won (\$374,180) in funding.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged the government, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the Ministry of Justice, and National Assembly members, on religious freedom and tolerance, including concerning conscientious objection on religious grounds. Embassy officers also met with members of various religious groups and NGOs to discuss the state of religious freedom and concerns over the imprisonment of conscientious objectors.