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## **NORTH KOREA: European Parliament resolution about religious persecution**

**The European Parliament adopts a resolution about the persecution of religious minorities**

*Interview of MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR Group/ Netherlands)*

The European Times (14.04.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3KLPCHw>

**The European Times: Mr Ruissen, on 30 March, you organized a conference about religious freedom in North Korea at the European Parliament. Why such an event now?**

We have been in touch with the London-based NGO Korea Future in the autumn of 2021 and during our talks we discussed Korea Future's new Report on religious freedom in North Korea. The idea was raised to bring this report under the attention of a greater public in Brussels through a conference in the European Parliament in March 2022. Not much attention has been paid to the situation of religious freedom in the DPRK since years, so the release of the new report was for us a good occasion to put the issue on the agenda again.

**The European Times: On 7 April, the European Parliament adopted a resolution about the human rights situation, including the persecution of religious minorities. Why are Christians considered "enemies of the state" and what are the consequences of such an infamous label?**

According to the report, DPRK's Ministry of State Security proactively gathers information on perceived threats to North Korea's political system, with a focus on those of domestic origin, which includes Christians. The hard core of Kim-dynasty's policy is the total submission to and the unconditional glorification of the 'divine' Kim Jong Un (as well as his late father and late grandfather). Christians obey the King of Heaven and do not want to be involved in the divine glorification of an earthly atheist leader. They are therefore accused of undermining the political system and being an existential threat to it. The authorities persecuted

religious believers on a variety of charges, including religious practice, religious activities in China, possessing religious items such as Bibles, contact with religious persons, attending religious services, and sharing religious beliefs. Christians and other religious adherents reportedly suffered from arbitrary surveillance, interrogation, arrest, detention, and imprisonment, punishment of family members, torture, sexual violence, forced labor and execution. For more information I would like to refer to the aforementioned report.

**Question: What are the main features of religious persecution that were highlighted by the resolution?**

The resolution states that the DPRK regime is systematically targeting religious beliefs and minorities, including Shamanism, Korean Buddhism, Catholicism, Cheondoism and Protestantism. Examples of such systematic targeting include the execution of some non-foreign Catholic priests and Protestant leaders who did not renounce their faith and being purged as 'American spies'. The resolution also refers to the *songbun* system (the nation's surveillance/security system), according to which religious practitioners belong to the 'hostile' class and are considered enemies of the state, deserving 'discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution'. The text mentions that documentation from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) shows that followers of Shamanism and Christianity are especially vulnerable to persecution. It also stresses that there have been reports on the severe repression of people involved in public and private religious activities, including arbitrary deprivation of liberty, torture, forced labor and execution and that *kwanliso* (political prison camps) remain operational because they are fundamental to the control and repression of the population.

The resolution condemns the severe restrictions on freedom of movement, expression, information, peaceful assembly and association, as well as discrimination based on the *songbun* system, which classifies people on the basis of state-assigned social class and birth, and also includes consideration of political opinions and religion. The parliament is deeply concerned about the systematic violations of freedom of religion and belief affecting Shamanism and Christianity as well as other religions in North Korea. It denounces the arbitrary arrests, long-term detention, torture, ill-treatment, sexual violence against and killings of religious people and urges the DPRK authorities to cease all violence against religious minorities and to grant them the right of freedom of religion and belief, the right of association and the right of freedom of expression. It further stresses the need to hold the perpetrators of these violent acts to account, including the Ministry of People's Social Security and the Ministry of State Security which are instrumental in the persecution of religious communities;

**Question: Pyongyang denied having been affected by the COVID. What is known about the impact of the pandemic in North Korea?**

Given the closed nature of the country little is known about the actual prevalence of Covid-19 in the DPRK, with a government denying the presence of the virus in the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has however been used by the DPRK to further isolate the country from the outside world, resulting in exacerbated entrenched human rights violations and a negative impact on its people's health. The DPRK has closed its borders to all external crossings to avoid the spread of COVID-19 and has not distributed any COVID-19 vaccines to its

people

**Question: What should be done to improve the human rights situation in North Korea?**

On 22 March 2022, the EU imposed asset freezes and a travel ban under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime on two individuals and one entity in the DPRK. It is remarkable that in a country with so many reported human rights violations, so little people are being sanctioned. This is probably partially due to the closed nature of the country with limited to no access to foreign organizations. It is important to hold all perpetrators of grave human rights violations to account for their deeds, including their sanctioning, to pursue efforts to refer the situation in the DPRK to the International Criminal Court. Before that can happen, it is very important to collect evidence and documentation of gross human rights violations. It is therefore very important that the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korea, humanitarian organizations, and civil society get access to the country. The resolution also encourages the EU and the Member States to develop a strategy complementing the EU's sanctions regime and taking into account the resumption of the political dialogue with North Korea (stalled since 2015) when the time is ripe, with a view to integrating human rights, denuclearisation and peace initiatives into its engagement with the DPRK.

*Photo: MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR Group/ Netherlands)*

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