

North Korea: Praying for a More Tolerant Regime

North Korean Dictator Kim Jong-Il's death has prompted instability in Asian markets and concerns about how a power transfer to a young, untested leader could destabilize the region. The reclusive communist nation's vulnerable Christian population may also be entering a period of uncertainty, resulting in either more harsh repression or a new period of relative tolerance.

"Sadly, succession periods between dictators and their children rarely result in true reforms, despite initial hopes," Faith J.H. McDonnell, Religious Liberty director for the Institute on Religion and Democracy. "Witness Syria's Bashar al-Assad: a mild-mannered and western-trained ophthalmologist who revealed himself fully capable of the same brutality as his late father."

The officially atheist state counts few Christians publicly. Defectors tell of a persecuted yet enduring house church movement, the size of which is impossible to ascertain. Since 2001, the U.S. State Department report on global religious freedom has named North Korea among the worst offenders for harsh limits on religious expression. U.S. officials believe North Korea's regime has sentenced between 150,000 and 200,000 people to political prison camps, many for solely reasons of religious practice.

"Rather than hoping for the best, Western church groups should not be silent about North Korea's various aggressions," McDonnell says. "Making absurd excuses for North Korea's inhuman persecution of Christians or pretending that a handful of government-run show churches in Pyongyang constitute any kind of religious freedom does not serve fellow believers."

North Korea has a vibrant Christian past: the capital of Pyongyang was once known as the “Jerusalem of the East” for being the fastest-growing Christian community in East Asia during the early 20th century.

“Our times are in God’s hands. The time of Kim Jong-Il’s merciless persecution of North Korean Christians and irrationally brutal treatment of all of North Korea’s citizens has been ended by God,” McDonnell says. “IRD asks Christians around the world to pray for the Christians of North Korea, who are among the world’s most persecuted Christian believers.”