

World
Watch
Research

North Korea: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / North Korea

Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

North Korea: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
26,090,000	400,000	OD estimate

Map of country



North Korea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	96	1
WWL 2023	98	1
WWL 2022	96	2
WWL 2021	94	1
WWL 2020	94	1

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

North Korea: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Government officials, Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

No matter whether North Korean Christians are heirs of the Christian communities from the time before the Korean War or whether they found Christian faith in other ways (e.g., during the great famine in the 1990s which caused tens of thousands of citizens to seek help in China, often finding it in Chinese churches), or whether they have come to faith more recently, when discovered by the authorities they are deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, and their families will share their fate as well. This unceasingly strict policy has been illustrated by a widely published report of the arrest of a family of five in April 2023 (see below: *Specific examples of violations*).

Christians do not have the slightest space in society; meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible and if some dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy. The 'Anti-reactionary thought law' (enacted in December 2020) makes it amply clear in its Articles 28 and 29 that being a Christian and/or possessing a Bible is a serious crime and will be severely punished. The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

North Korea has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
4. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

North Korea is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are arbitrarily executed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians are deported to political prison camps, tortured and forced to a life of hard labor (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 8)
- Every aspect of a North Korean's life is constantly monitored and controlled by the state (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians are not allowed to hold their beliefs and worship, either in public or private (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians are not allowed to gather or meet to worship (ICCPR Art. 21)
- Christians are categorized as "hostile" and discriminated against on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

[30 April 2023](#): According to a report by Radio Free Asia (RFA), five members of a family - apparently not immediate family members - were arrested in Suncheon city in South Pyongan province, while gathered for prayer and Bible study, and dozens of Bible booklets were confiscated (RFA, 26 May 2023). This is a very rare example of a persecution case getting widely publicized not long after the incident took place.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: 30 April 2023 - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/church-05262023115519.html>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / North Korea

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 NK report	AI North Korea 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/east-asia/north-korea/report-korea-democratic-peoples-republic-of/	23 June 2023
BBC News country profile North Korea - updated 26 April 2023	BBC North Korea profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929	23 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 - 137 countries	BTI 2022 NK report	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/PRK	23 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Korea, North - updated 20 June 2023	World Factbook North Korea	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-north/	23 June 2023
Crisis24 country report (Garda World)	Crisis24 NK report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/north-korea	23 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2022 - 167 countries	EIU Democracy Index 2022 - Asia pp.45-50	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf	23 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 - 179 countries	FSI 2023 North Korea	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	23 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index - 29 countries, North Korea not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	23 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index - 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 North Korea	https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-korea/freedom-world/2023	23 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report - 70 countries, North Korea not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	23 June 2023
Girls not Brides North Korea report	Girls not Brides North Korea	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/north-korea/	23 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 (country chapter)	HRW 2023 North Korea country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/north-korea	23 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 North Korea	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#kp	23 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index - 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 North Korea	https://rsf.org/en/north-korea	23 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index - 180 countries	CPI 2022 North Korea	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/north-korea	23 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Reports covering 191 countries, North Korea not included	UNDP HDR 2022	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights/#/ranks	23 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report North Korea	IRFR 2022 North Korea	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/	23 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 country report North Korea - 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 North Korea CPC	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/North%20Korea.pdf	23 June 2023
World Bank North Korea data - 2021	World Bank North Korea data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CcountryProfileId=b450fd571bar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=PRK	23 June 2023

Recent history

Understanding North Korea means understanding its leadership and personality cult. In its early years, from independence in 1945, the country followed Communist principles and engaged in an early war against UN troops in the Korean War 1950-53. Soon after that, it became clear that North Korea would not be a Communist country led by a collective leadership, but rather by one person, Kim Il Sung. After his death in 1994, he was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Il, who was in turn succeeded after his death in 2011 by his son, Kim Jong Un.

The country has two ideologies as its basis and although the terms have increasingly been used interchangeably, they are still distinct. One is called "Juche" which basically says that man is self-reliant (although this philosophy seems to have become less pronounced in recent years). The other is "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism", the worship of the leaders who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea and helping it flourish, without interference from outside forces. While Juche seems to have taken more of an ideological backseat in recent years, the worship of the leaders became ever more important and with its constant indoctrination, warnings about "superstitions" and religions (without naming them as such) became [more important](#) as well (USCIRF, "Kimilsungism-Komjongilism and the right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience in North Korea", 29 July 2022). The army plays an important role for the leadership, especially when it comes to the development and deployment of nuclear capabilities.

The country wants to be taken seriously and heard internationally, which is one of the reasons why its leaders have advanced its rocket and nuclear technology, making the world aware of its continued existence. This policy has been successful insofar as it earned Kim Jong Un a first historic face-to-face meeting with US President Trump in June 2018, followed by more meetings in the following months. However, it did not lead to concrete results: There was no relief from international sanctions and no reduction in the emphasis on self-reliance and the country's strength. The latter is on display through the country's development of advanced weaponry; again in 2022 an array of missile types underwent [testing](#) (CNN, 25 May 2022). This is the background for understanding why many members of the international community were [severely critical](#) of North Korea taking over the rotating leadership of the UN-backed "Conference on Disarmament" (AP News, 2 June 2022). In a long-anticipated move, North Korea declared itself a "[nuclear weapons state](#)" in September 2022 (BBC News, 9 September 2022). While the missile testing [continued](#) in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the country stopped short of carrying out its seventh nuclear test, prolonging a hiatus since September 2017 (BBC News, 20 March 2023).

After months of denying the presence of any COVID-19 infections in the country, in May 2022, Kim Jong Un finally [admitted](#) that the COVID-19 pandemic had arrived in North Korea (Reuters, 18 May 2022), although it was referred to as an unspecific "fever". He immediately mobilized the armed forces to support the country's health institutions. The health system in North Korea was notoriously fragile even before the arrival of the pandemic. The decision to close all borders with China in 2020 (although temporarily eased - Deutsche Welle/DW, 21 January 2021), had harsh consequences for the ailing economy and also for society at large. Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, later announced that her brother had been [infected](#) with COVID-19, blaming South Korea for sending the virus (BBC News, 11 August 2022). Kim Yo Jong also took the opportunity to claim victory in the country's battle against COVID and to praise her brother for tirelessly working for the people despite suffering from a high fever. North Korean borders did not [fully re-open](#) until 2023 (Washington Post, 5 September 2023).

The pandemic may not just have worsened the economic situation, but also contributed to the levels of malnutrition and hunger North Korea is facing (see below: *Economic landscape* and *Social and cultural landscape*). Another result of the pandemic has been that the country built (and fortified existing) [border walls](#) at its Chinese and Russian borders, respectively (Reuters, 29 May 2023).

The small Christian minority in North Korea continues to hide itself carefully, especially now as political tensions are growing again, and a new South Korean leadership will lead to a tightening of the ranks in the North Korean regime. In times when security is particularly tight, Christians are in particular danger due to being viewed as enemies of both the leadership and society in general. (For a detailed report on the sheer cruelty of the North Korean prison system, see the "North Korea [Prison Database](#)", published by Korea Future on 27 March 2022. For a specific view on freedom of religion and belief, see the report "[Persecuting Faith](#)", published by Korea Future on 27 October 2021).

Political and legal landscape

While Kim Jong Un has been demonstrating a different style of leadership from his father, his ultimate goal of seeking respect and safety for his regime does not differ at all. He is trying to emulate his grandfather by appearing communicative and benevolent in public. However, this does not mean any change in ideology or direction of leadership. Kim Jong Un has been proclaimed the “Great Successor” and has been given the titles “Supreme Leader” and “Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces”. More importantly, he holds key positions in all important powerhouses (party, state and army) through his role as First Secretary of Korea’s Workers’ Party. The 8th Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) Congress took place in January 2021, further cementing Kim Jong Un’s leadership. He has been given the title of “[General Secretary](#) of the KWP” (AP News, 11 January 2021). This title is more significant than it looks at first sight. Kim Jong Un’s father had been named the “eternal General Secretary” when he passed away. By taking on this new title in a time of (economic) hardship for North Korea shows how strong Kim Jong Un’s position is and that he is consolidating his rule.

Hopes that Kim Jong Un would choose a path of reform diminished in the course of 2012 and 2013 after economic reforms were not pursued and after continued nuclear tests and missile launches. Tests of ballistic missiles and rockets continued at a high frequency (see above: *Recent history*) which shows that regime survival is the highest priority and Kim Jong Un will do anything to stay visible and of significance on the regional and international stage, especially after his 'diplomatic offensive' largely failed to bring results: Beginning with a meeting with the Chinese president and secretary-general of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping, this also led him to meet several times with the US president and the South Korean president and once with the Russian president. This offensive was arguably caused by the effect of the international sanctions against the regime. The fact that Xi Jinping visited Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang in [June 2019](#), making it the fifth meeting in 15 months, indicates that China is most likely North Korea's closest and only ally, although not always a happy one (The Guardian, 20 June 2019). All those meetings failed to change the situation in the country and ease the international tension. In 2021, relations between North Korea and China seemed to [warm up again](#), not least illustrated by the fact that the two countries pledged to extend the 1961 'mutual friendship treaty' for a further 20 years (Jamestown Foundation, 17 August 2021). Another effort which faced a setback in the WWL 2024 reporting period was the country's satellite program: At the end of May 2023, the launch of a military reconnaissance satellite [failed](#) (Crisis Group, 2 June 2023).

The most visible sign of the inter-Korean ‘new normal’ to date was North Korea’s [demolition](#) of the liaison office in Kaesong in June 2020, which Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, had threatened would take place (BBC News, 16 June 2020). There is always a lot of speculation about promotions and demotions, and one example has been the widely noted fact that his sister has [not been given](#) a permanent seat in the Politburo as many observers had expected (Reuters, 11 January 2021). However, this is not necessarily to be seen as form of demotion: Kim Yo Jong remains an influential adviser and is the [only female member](#) of the State Affairs Commission (Daily News Brief, 1 October 2021). She does not need formal titles for wielding influence, due to her familial affiliation.

For a long time, speculations circulated about Kim Jong Un's health and possible [measures](#) in case of a temporary or permanent incapacitation (NK News, 16 June 2021). The question then, of course, arises as to who would step in to take over the position of country leader. This remains to be seen, but it seems likely that 'family blood' will be the trump card. These thoughts coincided with speculation about Kim Jong Un's health, as pictures had shown that he had [lost weight](#) (NK News, 8 June 2021). If this is related to a healthier lifestyle or a more serious health condition, is a question which is a vivid reminder that much of what goes on in North Korea is based on guesswork (see below: *Trends analysis #4*). The rumor mill started up again when Kim Jong Un was accompanied by his daughter at a rocket launch in November 2022. A flurry of speculation began about whether she is being presented to the public as a [potential successor](#), especially given her father's alleged health problems (NK News, 18 January 2023).

North Korean authorities ordered the [expansion](#) of the political prison camp system during the Eighth Party Congress (DailyNK, 19 February 2021) and while several camps had been closed or merged over the previous years, it was only since the imposition of COVID-19 quarantine measures that the [prison population](#) grew by at least 20,000 since March 2020, which was due to quarantine offenders landing in political prison camps (DailyNK, 28 July 2021). The order for expanding the prison system was first and foremost a reaction to the pandemic and quarantine measures. However, it seems that the camp population [fell](#) by 20,000 by August 2022 (DailyNK, 31 August 2022). This does not mean that they have been released, but rather that they may have died because of poor prison conditions, punishment and even torture. At the same time, the order for expanding the prison system coincided with the announcement of the '[Anti-reactionary thought law](#)' (WWR, 28 January 2021), which was [enacted](#) in December 2020 (DailyNK, 31 May 2021). Apart from trying to ban and punish everything South Korean – including accents, music and hair styles -, Article 28 of this law calls for up to 10 years of correctional labor for the crime of importing banned material, and even death for importing large quantities. Of particular interest is that a source in the country told the news-site Daily NK that the Bible is included among the banned books mentioned in Article 28. This is no surprise, since it is well-known that the possession of a Bible in North Korea has frequently led to serious punishment, including execution.

North Korea has been intensifying its battle against all "capitalist tendencies", showing its unchanging [ideological resolve](#) (38North, 5 November 2021). At first sight it may be surprising that this campaign is being intensified at a time when the authorities are busy combatting the (back then, officially non-existent) pandemic and the resulting economic fallout. However, it does make sense because the regime's overarching goal is to secure its survival and that means keeping all citizens in line and all outside influences at bay. This ideological battle also targets the Christian minority, which is particularly affected where the campaign has been intensified in the regions bordering China.

This illustrates the fact that, if anything, the situation for Christians has become even more difficult, now that the 'honeymoon' of international diplomacy has ended and control has tightened again in society, particularly in the border region. At the same time, the diplomatic [exodus](#) from Pyongyang has continued and only a few embassies remain open (NK News, 11 March 2022); some observers estimate that a mere 300 foreign nationals are currently still in the country. In this respect, there was another sign of an economically and socially strained

situation when the Russian ambassador made the frank announcement that the Russian embassy would be sending home several of its [diplomats](#) due to the "shortages in the country" and the fact that they had already been serving in the country for three years (NK News, 26 May 2023). With less foreign residents, it has once again become harder to get information out of the reclusive country and to support its Christians. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 made matters worse as it led North Korea to completely shut off its border with China (and Russia). This harmed the already hard-hit economy, but also effectively cut off all traffic and communication across the border. On the other side of the border, meanwhile, Chinese officials have been [searching the homes](#) of female North Koreans, looking for signs of possible contact with South or North Korea (Daily NK, 3 November 2021). At the same time, Chinese COVID-restrictions created severe [complications](#) for any groups helping escapees (NK News, 26 December 2022).

Gender perspective

On paper, North Korea has developed legislation that seemingly protects women and girls from gender inequality in many areas. [The Criminal Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#) (2009) criminalizes rape, trafficking and sexual abuse, and the country acceded to the CEDAW Convention in 2001. Domestic violence is also outlawed under the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women. According to a 2020 report by the [Borgen Project](#), however, such policies have not been successfully implemented. Human Rights Watch notes that violence against women, domestic violence and rape are [prevalent](#) across the country (HRW 2023, country chapter North Korea). The 2010 law does not provide for victim protection or for criminal liability of perpetrators, creating a means of legal impunity for the use of domestic and sexual violence as a form of religious persecution.

A context that further exposes Christian men and women to pressure are the armed forces; since 2015, it has become mandatory for females to be drafted into military service, which is a notoriously controlling environment and opposed to all religious practice. The length of service is up to 10 years for men and 5 to 8 years for women (World Factbook North Korea).

Religious landscape

No reliable data showing a statistical, religious break-down is available. The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians is 400,000 but could be as high as 500,000. WCD data (accessed March 2023) lists the number of Buddhists at just over 390,000. A South Korean archbishop claimed in a recently published book that the Catholic church in North Korea [is growing](#) despite being underground and persecuted (UCA News, 17 May 2022). The WCD categories "Ethno-religionist" and "Other" (which includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist and Zoroastrian) are listed at well over 3 million each.

Religion in North Korea means in practice the personality cult surrounding the leaders' family. Everyone has to attend weekly information meetings and self-criticism sessions and memorize more than 100 pages of ideological material, including documents, poems and songs which all praise the morals and majesty of the Kims. Allegedly, around 100,000 Juche 'research centers' –

mostly comprising of a single room – exist throughout the country. Even pre-school children are indoctrinated at an early stage. Changes in nursery [education](#) were announced in August 2020 and sessions on the greatness of the leaders, especially Kim Jong Un, have now been extended to 90 minutes daily (Daily NK, 11 September 2020).

The fact that 'being a Christian' was explicitly mentioned in the 'Anti-reactionary thought law' shows the regime's continued strong anti-Christian stance. Party officials are obliged to study the political ideology for [two hours a day](#), on top of already existing weekly study sessions and self-criticism meetings (RFA, 13 July 2021). There are a host of programs to make sure they remain politically and ideologically 'nourished', a recent example being the 2023 reading campaign with the slogan '[Read 10,000 pages](#)' (RFA, 28 April 2023). Such programs aim at keeping all citizens loyal to the regime and help combat any 'enemy' influences, such as South Korean music and TV shows, as well as films of Western origin and Christian faith. This not only puts a huge burden on officials, but also shows how tense the situation for those regarded as 'hostile forces' has become.

There are still followers of Buddhism and Confucianism in the country, despite the fact that worshipping the leaders in theory leaves no room for any other religion. However, these religions belong to the cultural mind-set, adherents are able to live their faith without anyone noticing and these religions are thus tolerated. Christianity, on the other hand, is seen as a dangerous foreign religion which has to be combatted aggressively. There is consequently no room for Christians in North Korea, and they must live their lives in utmost secrecy. When it is occasionally reported that South Korean church leaders [met with their North Korean counterparts](#), such news should not be taken at face value (Ecumenical News, 23 June 2018). The official North Korean church – if it exists at all - can hardly be seen as being representative for all Christian witness in the country; indeed, some observers view such delegations as pure sham. Gathering in large groups is absolutely impossible for Christians and it is life-threatening even to be simply recognized as being a Christian.

In 2018, Moscow Orthodox Patriarch Kirill announced [plans for an official visit to Pyongyang](#) and its recently built Orthodox church (Pravmir, 4 September 2018), but this visit has still not yet taken place. According the US State Department (IRFR 2022 North Korea, page 15): "The Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity operated in Pyongyang, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country. The clergy included North Koreans, several of whom had reportedly studied at the Russian Orthodox seminary in Moscow. An August 2021 press release by the Russian Orthodox Church's Department for External Church Relations indicated services at the facility continued to take place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The press release noted that the church 'was a priceless gift of the DPRK state leadership to Russian Orthodox Christians residing in Pyongyang' but made no mention of North Koreans worshipping there."

Economic landscape

No reliable economic data is available; the UNDP does not include North Korea in its analysis and the World Bank only issues limited country details. GDP per capita and the growth rate are not available, neither is the poverty gap. North Korea remained in the low-income status, according to the World Bank classification.

The country is under international sanctions and needs international aid, but the regime denies direct access to its citizens in need, an access which has been even more restricted due to COVID-19 lockdown measures. One observer described the North Korean economic policy as "[muddling through](#) with few options" (38North, 7 January 2022). Although humanitarian aid is exempted from the sanctions, the additional isolation caused by the country lock-down and by the fact that many international aid workers have left the country, has brought the few programs which were still running to a standstill. A growing informal [private sector](#) with markets (called "Jangmadang") is in existence, especially in the larger cities (NK HiddenGulag, 4 December 2021), and the local population is largely dependent on this sort of trading for survival. Those markets also [empower women](#), as they are usually the ones running the business; men are expected to show up at their state-organized workplaces, even though the markets present a higher income (NK Hidden Gulag, 25 August 2020).

At the 8th Korean Workers Party Congress, referred to above, the economy was one of the major topics, not least because COVID-19 and the related border closings derailed all economic planning. It has been decided to rein in the free-wheeling private sector and to bring back (more) [state control](#) (38North, 9 February 2021). And while it may be exaggerated to talk about a full return to old-style Communist economics, this definitely means a [recentralization](#) of economic policy (East Asia Forum, 10 April 2021). Consequently, [state-owned shops](#) should benefit from this policy (RFA, 3 June 2021). While efforts were and are being made to strengthen a policy of [import substitution](#) (38North, 10 February 2022), not least due to the political situation, North Korea's economy is dependent on the country's big neighbor, China. And while the border trade with China [slowly re-opened](#) in 2022, including restarting the suspended freight train service between North Korea and China (RFA, 27 September 2022), it should be kept in mind just how dependent North Korea is on China as an export destination. According to a report, China imported coal from North Korea at 1/4 of the world market prize, capitalizing on its [de facto monopoly](#) (NK Econwatch, 25 April 2022). At the same time, in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the rail connection to [Russia](#) seems to have been revitalized (38North, 12 December 2022).

Another important means of earning hard currency has been for the government to send migrant workers to other countries. However, there are now fewer countries accepting workers than in previous years and the COVID-19 pandemic has anyway effectively brought this financial boost to a halt. International sanctions are also limiting this way of earning currency. [The lifting of sanctions](#) has been the central goal of all North Korea's international diplomacy, but no such relief can be expected in the short-term (BBC News, 16 June 2020). The fact that North Korea decided to [cut all communication and liaison lines](#) with South Korea in June 2020 shows that it is not prepared to pursue economic development at all costs and that regime safety and ideology will always be prioritized over the well-being of its people (38North, 9 June 2020). One sign of the seriousness of the economic situation can be seen in the appearance of [propaganda posters](#) at the beginning of 2023, which apparently prioritize the economy even over missiles (38North, 9 January 2023).

In May 2022, North Korea finally conceded that COVID-19 infections had begun to emerge, although it spoke of unclassified cases of "fever" (see above: *Political and legal landscape*). While Kim Jong Un himself had previously only spoken of challenges regarding the food situation, the North Korean government has openly acknowledged the continuing [food shortages](#) in the

country, most recently in a statement by Kim Jong Un in February 2023 (Reuters, 27 February 2023). Reports have emerged that the country has now approached the [World Food Program](#) (WFP) for help (Wall Street Journal, 2 March 2023). However, the only solution being propagated by the North Korean leadership to combat the shortages seems to be a [reform](#) of the agricultural sector (Reuters, 28 February 2023) and a call for [stronger ruling party control](#) (NK News, 2 March 2023). While the food prices in North Korea seem to have stabilized, they have done so at a [high level](#), making it very hard for people to make ends meet (38North, 25 June 2023). The population is being kept in the dark about the reasons and the small Christian minority will doubtless remain in hiding as much as possible, especially as efforts may increase to crack down on potential defectors and on all perceived and real dissent.

Gender perspective

All North Korean men and unmarried women are assigned workplaces by the government and their attendance is strictly controlled, even if they do not get paid ([HRW 2017, country chapter North Korea](#)). Free from government-assigned positions, married women have greater freedom to assume the role of main actors in informal markets. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women were estimated to contribute more [household income](#) than men (in part due to low wages in state-assigned workplaces for men) – yet also take the lead with domestic chores (Medium, 26 February 2022). The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, deemed excessive by critics, further exacerbated social and economic pressures in the informal [Jangmadang](#) market sector, where women make up the vast majority of the workforce (NK Hidden Gulag Blog, 4 October 2021).

Social and cultural landscape

Little reliable data is available. According to the World Factbook North Korea (all numbers should be treated with caution):

- **Main ethnic groups:** ethnically homogenous Korean, there is a small ethnic Chinese group and a few ethnic Japanese
- **Main languages:** Korean
- **Urbanization rate:** 63.2%
- **Literacy rate:** 100%

The World Bank North Korea data does contain a limited amount of information, but all numbers have to be treated with caution:

- **Population/Age:** 19% of the population is below the age of 14, 11.4% is above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school enrollment is 89% (2018, the completion rate is 97% (2009)
- **Unemployment:** 3%, 85.1% are in vulnerable employment (modeled ILO estimate) and the rate of people employed in the agricultural sector is 44% (2019, ILO).
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 73 years
- **Health:** 18.2% of all children under five years of age have a prevalence of stunting (modeled estimate, 2020). There are 36.8 physicians and 143 hospital beds per 10,000 people.
- **Student-teacher ratio at primary school level:** 20:1

- **Forest:** The forest area in North Korea is an estimated 49,000 sqm, a decline of 40% within just 30 years.
- **Urban population growth:** 0.85%

Korean society is influenced by Confucianism, a Chinese ethical and philosophical system going back to the 6th century BC. Out of this system, North Korea developed a social classification which includes every citizen and keeps records in the Resident Registration File. This system, called *Songbun*, divides society into three classes - the core (28%), the wavering (45%) and the hostile class (27%). This classification is further divided into 51 sub-categories. Christians and their descendants are recorded in the hostile class and even have two sub-categories of their own. This system remains in operation and still very much influences every day life. However, reports from North Korea show that [bribes can make a difference](#) and cause officials to look the other way (NK News, 5 September 2019). Such bribes are potentially dangerous as the regime has been cracking down on corruption and it is not an option for Christians anyway, whose opportunities for earning money are limited.

North Korea is a mountainous country with limited space for arable land. Due to its geography, it faces a high potential for [natural disasters](#): Torrential rains, typhoons, flooding and storm surges occur annually. Soil erosion and sedimentation, landslides, droughts and dust and sand storms pose serious threats to life and livelihood in the country (HRNK Insider, 2 November 2020). UN reports continue to show that millions of North Korean people suffer from chronic food insecurity (to varying degrees), high malnutrition rates and deep-rooted economic problems. Young children, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly are particularly vulnerable. According to a 2021 report, [one fifth](#) of North Korean children under five suffer from stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition (NK News, 5 May 2021). According to a report published on 23 May 2023 jointly by UNICEF, WHO and the World Bank entitled "[Levels and Trends in child malnutrition](#)", more than 285,000 children below the age of five suffer from stunted growth in North Korea (page 19). Joining the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the first ever visit of a United Nations Special Rapporteur (on that topic) has been seen as a modest sign of improvement, but more recent research shows that the treatment of [disabled people](#) still falls short of international standards (NK Hidden Gulag, 3 August 2020).

The strong decline of forest areas (as shown in the World Bank's country profile reported above) is another illustration of the difficult circumstances the population finds itself in. Not just food is scarce, but also energy and any kind of heating material. Although North Korea is resource-rich and has, for instance, a considerable amount of coal, much of it is used for exporting to China. Therefore, people are forced to chop wood in order to survive. The fact that North Korean authorities and Kim Jong Un publicly admitted that the country is facing food security problems shows how grave this challenge has become. The WFP is seeking to [triple](#) its funds for food assistance programs in North Korea (NK News, 28 February 2023). Christians suffer from the dire situation as well and have the added danger of not just being classified as hostile (according to *Songbun*) if their faith is discovered, but also of being interrogated, brought to camps or sometimes even killed on the spot. This is why they carefully hide their Christian faith as much as possible.

In June 2021, North Korea submitted a [Voluntary National Report](#) on the implementation of the "2030 agenda", the sustainable development goals as set out by the United Nations. Whereas it seems safe to say that most of the data provided paints a rosy picture (and the report was submitted well before the regime admitted the existence of COVID-19 in the country), it is remarkable that North Korea seems to be trying to implement these goals.

The COVID-19 crisis has reportedly further exacerbated economic and social pressures in North Korea ([DW, 12 April 2021](#)). The fact that the regime admitted to the arrival of COVID-19 infections shows how challenging the situation must be, although the number of cases mentioned casts serious doubts on the spread of the pandemic: As of 12 July 2022, 4,768,260 "fever cases" were reported with 74 fever deaths; genuine COVID cases were listed as 168 with one fatality (NK News, [COVID tracker](#)). The fact that North Korean authorities reported that [350,000 people died](#) of diseases in 2022 (RFA, 29 September 2022) may come closer to the real death toll of COVID-19. In January 2023, North Korea's capital city, Pyongyang, was placed under '[lock-down](#)' due to a "respiratory illness" (Reuters, 25 January 2023). If asked what this means for the hidden Christians in the country, then it must be said that any medical help is welcome, since they suffer from the absence of intensive healthcare just like the majority of the population. But for those banned to the prison camps, there is no access to proper medical facilities of any sort, and it is more or less certain that any humanitarian or medical aid will not be allowed to reach them.

Gender perspective

North Korea's strong system of control suppresses the freedom of both men and women. While women are afforded equality in legislation – at least on paper – they are considered socially subservient to men and treated as inferior. According to Human Rights Watch, they are exposed constantly to stereotyped gender roles (HRW 2023 North Korea country chapter). At school, boys and girls are even given different curricula, designed according to traditional gender roles ([The Borgen Project, 9 May 2019](#)).

A report by NGO Global Rights Compliance shows how vulnerable [North Korean women and girls](#) in China have become. Having been helped across the border to China, these refugees are prone to become victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse and even slave-like conditions (GRC, 26 March 2023). This is especially true for the northeastern provinces of China (in the report referred to as the 'red zone'). These are lawless zones for such women, a number of whom have become Christians.

Technological landscape

Reliable data is again hard to come by when considering the technological context. Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 North Korea) does include North Korea in its analysis, but the number of people having Internet access or using Facebook is very low with a 0.1% penetration rate, and estimated at 20,000 and 16,000 users respectively in July 2022.

According to World Bank North Korea data (which has many gaps as well), an estimated 23 out of every 100 people held cell phone subscriptions in 2020. Another report puts this [number](#) at 18% (Joong Ang Daily, 11 August 2020), and yet another report says that [19% of the population](#) uses mobile phones, mostly senior government officials and diplomats (KBS, 12 August 2022).

However, these figures require some explanation: As the regime sees it as vital to control the flow of information, only domestic cell phones can be bought and used. It has become increasingly dangerous for anyone to bring Chinese-made phones into the country, which can connect to the Chinese mobile system in the border areas. The authorities have done everything they can to scramble the signals and have used sophisticated [technical systems](#) to hinder and monitor such calls (Daily NK, 23 October 2020). Consequently, the number of people allowed to access the Internet (and not just a domestic intranet), is estimated to be in the low five-digit area and each is carefully selected and supervised.

A report in July 2019 by '38North' highlighted the security- and surveillance-orientation of the complete mobile phone system and called it "[one of the most restrictive cellular environments in the world](#)". The report estimates the number of subscribers nevertheless to be around 5 million, which would exceed 20% of the population. There are no available statistics on the breakdown of mobile and Internet usage by gender.

A report by HRNK published in December 2019 entitled "[Digital Trenches](#)" also explains the technical counter-measures the regime is taking against the influx of foreign information. A different way of countering what is perceived as 'fake news' was highlighted in a report in May 2020, explaining how [video blogs](#) are being used by the regime to explain North Korea (and especially life in Pyongyang) to a young international audience (NK News, 18 May 2020). At the same time and at high personal risk, there are North Korean citizens [circumventing](#) the technical restrictions which the government employs to control smartphone usage (Reuters, 28 April 2022; see the full report from Lumen, "[Project Reveal](#)", 27 April 2022). Another report estimates the ratio of students from Pyongyang using [circumvention programs](#) on their phones at 10%, despite the high personal risk (DailyNK, 17 August 2022).

North Korea has experienced what one observer described as a "[revolution](#)" in TV media, since the number of TV channels now available for the general public has increased, although all are still state-run (38North, 16 December 2020). Indeed, the technological landscape is probably the area which has seen the greatest amount of change over the last few years. Nowadays, most North Koreans have been in touch with Western (especially South Korean) culture, often in the form of soap operas, films on DVD or pop music. A vivid illustration of this is the report of a soldier who ran into trouble when caught doing [dance moves](#) copied from famous K-pop band BTS (Daily NK, 13 August 2020). These unofficial opportunities also benefit Christians and their access to Christian material. However, this is a double-edged sword: Better access also means increased supervision by the authorities. When Christians dare to access and store material electronically, the risks are considerable.

Security situation

Technically, North Korea is still at war with the United States of America, since only a ceasefire agreement was reached at the end of the Korean War in 1953. Consequently, this has been one of the issues on the table in the bilateral talks. As this matter is also connected to the presence of US troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula in South Korea, it is not as easy to resolve as it may seem at first sight. A much bigger challenge is North Korea's nuclear capability. Although there is still some debate as to whether North Korea would indeed be able to mount a nuclear device on a long-range ballistic missile and target - for example - US territory, the technological

advances are serious enough to cause international tension, including making neighboring China nervous. Hence, the UN Security Council agreed on tough economic sanctions which were by-and-large implemented strictly, although there are indications that China has been easing its compliance. Talks focusing on denuclearization remain complex. Less devastating, but nonetheless highly threatening, is the fact that North Korea has considerable conventional firepower to target Seoul in any possible escalation. Seoul is only 56 km from the North Korean border.

In recent years, the official number of North Koreans fleeing the country and reaching South Korea has been [decreasing](#); the number in 2019 was 1047, a decline of 8% against 2018 (1137), which had been an increase of 10 escapees compared to 2017 (Korea Times, 10 January 2020). The fact that the borders were shut down due to the COVID-19 crisis had an influence on the numbers for 2020, as only 229 people made it out of North Korea to South Korea in that year. Particularly closely watched by the authorities is the number of border guards defecting, as this may indicate the situation in the wider country. Thus, it was noteworthy that at the beginning of March 2021, a group of [six border guards](#) left for China (RFA, 24 March 2021). However, in 2021, a [record low number](#) of only 63 North Koreans made it to South Korea (NK News, 20 January 2022). Although there is a [continuing flow of escapees](#), just 67 North Koreans made it to South Korea in 2022, which was the second lowest number ever recorded (NK News, 10 January 2023). In the first nine months of 2023, 139 North Koreans [escaped](#), with 18 men and 47 women in the second quarter (NK News, 24 October 2023). [Facial recognition technology](#) in use in China is increasing the risk of North Korean escapees being tracked and caught, especially if they use public transportation. As a result, the prices charged by smugglers assisting them are rising steeply and, according to data from the South Korean Ministry of Unification, the number of North Koreans arriving in the South is likely to remain a mere double digit trickle (RFA, 22 June 2023).

Particularly interesting is the fact that 85% of all defectors in 2018 were female, confirming a long-term trend; one reason for this is the fact that women usually have more freedom of movement if they are not expected to appear at a set workplace. Another reason, however, is the sad fact that women are the main target for human traffickers, be it for work or for marriage purposes. According to the latest US Trafficking in Persons Report, the government has not taken steps to prevent such trafficking and has reportedly subjected victims of trafficking who return to the DPRK to gross human rights violations ([Tracking in Persons Report 2022, pp.326-327](#)). Reports say that secret service agents from North Korea are [infiltrating](#) Chinese and South Korean churches in China and the Chinese government has also been cracking down on Korean citizens in China and ethnic Korean Chinese, which is having an effect on [North Korean refugee networks](#) (DailyNK, 11 January 2019 and Reuters, 17 June 2019).

Gender perspective

A [2020 UN report](#) has highlighted the particular gender-specific human rights violations suppressing women in these camps, which include sexual violence, forced nudity, rape and forced abortion (see also: [HRNK report, 2022](#)). Christian men, too, experience physical violence and maltreatment within labor camps. Greater cooperation between the North Korean intelligence agency and Chinese police has resulted in increasing numbers of defectors – usually

women – being identified and forcibly repatriated to North Korea, where they, too, face severe punishment ([Trafficking in Persons Report 2022, p.176](#)). Escaping these atrocious conditions reportedly became more difficult over recent years following the border-closure in 2020 due to COVID-19 ([The Borgen Project, 29 August 2022](#)). In 2021, China restarted its [forced repatriation](#) policy despite the pandemic (HRW News, 22 July 2021).

Trends analysis

1) COVID-19 exacerbated economic challenges and food shortages

As stated above under *Recent history*, Kim Jong Un himself admitted in May 2022 that COVID-19 infections had begun to be recorded in the country. The North Korean authorities had always rejected international offers of medical assistance, including those from the WHO and its Covax program (BBC News, 1 September 2021). The regime would seem to prefer to accept aid from neighboring China rather than having to agree to work with other international partners. Regime survival has been the most important goal for decades. It is thus not surprising that a particularly challenging social and economic environment is answered by a tightening of control and strengthening of state-owned shops and enterprises.

The BBC released a [report on life in North Korea](#) in 2023 interviewing three citizens within the country, which exposed “the disaster unfolding there since the government sealed the borders more than three years ago”. The insights into the desperate personal lives of a number of citizens ties in well with reports on the [worsening food shortages](#) (NK News, 16 June 2023). Against this backdrop, it is remarkable that the regime asked the WFP for support. At the same time, it is a strong reminder that the rulers are trying to square the circle, since a first necessary step would be to grant outside experts access to the country in order to assess the situation. As long as the government’s response is guided purely by ideology and an ever stronger emphasis on party control, the population’s situation will not improve. The conclusion drawn by an expert on North Korea, Professor Andrei Lankov, is quite sobering in the BBC report. He states: "If people don't trust each other, there is no starting point for resistance. ... What that means is North Korea can stabilize and last for years and decades to come."

However, other observers hold a contrasting opinion: Michael Kirby, for instance, who has chaired the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea since its inception in 2013, claims adamantly on the occasion of the 10 anniversary of publishing the COI report on the Human Rights situation in North Korea: "But [nothing in international affairs stands still for long](#), particularly given the dangers that the DPRK poses to its neighbors and the world. Change will come, possibly suddenly. So much is certain as a lesson of history" (NK News, 12 June 2023). Whichever conclusion one draws, the fact remains that Christians in the country are at the bottom of the pile. They share the economic misery in the country, but also suffer as being classed as unwanted citizens.

2) Increasing isolation - reversed?

As already stated under Political and legal landscape, the international community in North Korea continued its exodus and is estimated to amount to less than 300 people now. Independent reporting from North Korea has been virtually impossible for some years already, but even a neutral or just 'another' view from observers inside the country is increasingly hard

to come by. The international community is trying to make sense of what is happening in the country, including leadership speculation (see below: *Trend #4*).

North Korea wants to stay high on the list of US priorities and not be sidelined by topics such as competition with China or the Ukraine war. About the latter, the Russian ambassador to North Korea [invited](#) the country to send workers to help rebuild parts of Ukraine (DailyNK, 5 August 2022). The building work is intended for parts of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine, which are not internationally recognized as belonging to Russia. North Korea has reportedly already selected workers for the task, not least because the country very much needs the foreign currency. This is all the more noteworthy since North Korea has never been at the forefront of taking sides. It is now only the second country after Syria to recognize the so-called 'Peoples Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk'.

As one commentator said, this smacks of [lackeyism](#); from the North Korean regime's current point of view Russia and China can do no wrong. It seems that North Korea's leader has seen the geopolitics around him changing and has drawn his conclusion (NK News, 18 August 2022). His vow in June 2023 to "[hold hands](#)" with President Putin and bolster strategic cooperation, fits this pattern (Reuters, 12 June 2023). Consequently, Kim Jong Un [travelled to Russia](#) and arguably the strongest result he brought home was the promise of Russian grain being delivered to North Korea, reportedly in exchange for munition and weapons (War on the Rocks, 12 September 2023).

A hotline between the two Koreas had been re-established in July 2021, which was seen as a sign of a thawing relationship. However, hopes were seriously dampened when it became known that North Korea did [not pick up](#) the phone after South Korea started its annual military exercises with US forces (Reuters, 9 August 2021). In October 2021, the [re-opening of the telephone hotlines](#) with South Korea was announced (Reuters, 3 October 2021). Time will tell if this had to do with the dire situation caused by COVID-19. So far, North Korea has strictly rejected all offers of support from South Korea and has continued its [belligerent rhetoric](#) towards the South (Reuters, 6 April 2023).

3) Increasing self-confidence amid warming ties with China

In a rare event, North Korea took up the [rotating presidency](#) of the UN Conference on Disarmament, a step which was highly criticized (Associated Press, 2 June 2022). In 2023, North Korea also received a seat on the executive board of the [WHO](#) (Wall Street Journal, 6 June 2023).

While China may be unhappy with its neighbor's behavior and its ideology of self-reliance, it still has many reasons to keep North Korea afloat. The close and warm ties were praised at the 60th anniversary of the China-NK [friendship treaty](#), but the enthusiasm and ideological proximity may have given way to geopolitical considerations and power balancing (38North, 30 June 2021), especially at a time where tensions with the USA are flaring up again. The main geopolitical considerations are:

- The unpredictability of any scenario if the Kim regime were to collapse;
- The stability of the whole region and the question whether North Korea's nuclear weapons could be a potential danger for China itself;

- In the event of any form of North-South re-unification, it is likely that US troops would be stationed directly at China's border.

In any case, warming ties with China are bad news for Christians and a more technically sophisticated border control is also making unofficial contact with China much more difficult for Christians, as can be seen in the supervision of public transport in China by facial recognition technology (see above: *Security situation*).

4) Another year of leadership speculation

As far as the question of future leadership is concerned, North Korea remains a mystery, even more so now that the foreign community within North Korea (which has always acted as a valuable source of information) has become so small. Kim Jong Un's health has been an object of speculation, even though he is only about forty years old (NK News, 8 June 2021). Even a mere bandage or a "[mysterious spot](#)" leads to media coverage and speculation (NK News, 2 August 2021). What would happen if he would be suddenly incapacitated is anyone's guess, but one of the safer bets is that 'family blood' would be more important than any other consideration. Up until recently, analysts have focused on his sister, but ever since Kim Jong Un's young daughter has repeatedly appeared at official events and in news broadcasts, observers have been busy trying to guess the [reasons](#) for this (NK News, 13 February 2023).

It should also be kept in mind that the political messaging of the North Korean leadership should be read with certain filters (in the report "[Understanding North Korea's public messaging](#): an introduction", the author suggests the LATTE method: "Level, Audience, Timing, Tone and Everything else"; NCNK, 7 May 2022). Another thinktank summed up its [method of interpretation](#) as follows (War on the Rocks, 11 May 2023): "Emerging North Korea analysts should learn to read between the lines of propaganda, ditch their biases, work in teams, contextualize their sources, and expand their horizons beyond the peninsula. Reading North Korean propaganda begins with learning how to see the value hiding behind the noise and repetition. This entails parsing Pyongyang's public messaging from five different angles: who it is coming from, who it is intended for, when it is released, how it is presented, and what the context is. Propaganda is worth deciphering precisely because it is so carefully controlled."

This much seems clear, however: The regime will do everything necessary to stay in control and speculation about the future - also within the country, not just among commentators abroad - is seen as a danger to the country's security and stability. The pressure on any dissent, perceived or real, is likely to increase and this will also be felt by Christians. Thus, meetings of Christians - and even private acts of Christian worship - are likely to become even more dangerous in the coming months and years.

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WWL 2024: Church information / North Korea

Christian origins

In 1603 a Korean diplomat returned from Beijing carrying several theological books written by a Jesuit missionary in China. He began disseminating the information in the books and the first seeds of Christianity in its Roman Catholic form were sown. In 1758 King Yeongjo of Joseon officially outlawed Christianity as an evil practice and Korean Christians were subjected to severe persecution, particularly in 1801 and 1866. In this last wave, approximately [8,000 Catholics](#) were killed across the whole of Korea (Christian Today, accessed 14 August 2020).

When the first Protestant missionaries settled permanently in Korea in 1885, they found a small community of Christians already there and two years later the first Bible was published in Korean. The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1905 (made official in 1910) unintentionally caused a great upsurge in the numbers of Christians as Christianity became linked with movements supporting Korean nationalism. In 1907 the Great Pyongyang Revival began, and the capital became known as the “Jerusalem of the East”. Hundreds of churches sprang up and there were numerous revival meetings. Missionaries also set up educational institutions throughout the country.

Under Japanese rule the Church was increasingly persecuted and Christians and other civilians were forced to bow before the altars of the emperor. After the defeat of Japan in World War II, Kim Il Sung came to power in the Soviet-controlled sector of the Korean Peninsula north of the 38th Parallel. In 1948 he was able to impose a Communist (atheistic) regime. During the Korean War (1950-53) many Christians fled and after the war, tens of thousands of Christians were killed, imprisoned or banished to remote areas. The rest of the Church went underground. It is estimated that before the Korean War there had been more than 300,000 Christians in the northern part of Korea. Just ten years later, there was no visible presence of them anymore.

Church spectrum today

No list is available for publication.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no hotspots of violations of religious freedom in North Korea in the classical meaning of the phrase. Insurgency is unthinkable and the regime keeps a watchful eye on all citizens. For several years, the border region with China might have been called a hotspot, since a constant stream of defections (with South Korea as the final intended destination) crossed this part of the country into China. But increased efforts from both sides, China and North Korea, have throttled

this stream to a trickle. The border is now closely monitored and even with the help of brokers it has become difficult to make an illegal crossing, drastically reducing the stream of escapees. A new Chinese policy is calling for authorities to step up efforts in [preventing “defectors heading to South Korea”](#) (Daily NK, 2 August 2023). The fact that there are slightly more reports coming from the border regions does not necessarily point to a regional hotspot; it might simply be the case that these regions have a more contact with the outside world.

The various forms of [prison camps and total control zones](#) can be seen as areas where Christians are facing most difficulties (US State Department, March 2019), but it is not easy to obtain up-to-date details about these camps (see HRNK's updates, e.g., the [2021 publication](#) on Political Prison Camp Kwan-li-so No.25, 30 September 2021).

Christian communities and how they are affected

There are neither communities of expatriate Christians (due to the pandemic almost all expatriates anyway left the country), nor non-traditional Christian communities in North Korea; all Christians belong to one of the two following groups and are experiencing the severest forms of religious freedom violations and persecution imaginable:

Historical Christian communities

The Christians in this category originate from the time before the Korean War (1950 -1953). While many Christians either died in the war or fled to the South, others stayed and they and their descendants (now in the third or fourth generation) make up these communities with their "inherited" denominational identity. Every citizen is classified by the North Korean authorities into a social system called *Songbun*. Christians are classified under the 'hostile' classes and even have two subclasses of their own, namely class 37 for Protestant Christians and 39 for Catholic Christians. These classes generally apply to those Christians whose parents or grandparents were known to be Christians. For the largest part they were banished to isolated villages as a punishment for having the wrong *Songbun*. Due to the guilt-by-association principle, the descendants of those Christians face insurmountable social and other obstacles and are watched with suspicion. Some of the historical Christian communities were able to hide their faith and form an underground church.

Converts to Christianity

These converts come from a Communist or "Kimilsungism" background. Many of them are North Koreans who became Christians during the 1990s, when countless people crossed the border to China during the years of famine and found help in Chinese churches. Many also crossed the border after the year 2000, but not in such large numbers. After [returning](#) to North Korea, they remained true to their new-found faith and shared the gospel with trustworthy family members and friends (Associated Press, 5 April 2018).

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: 8,000 Catholics - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/february/korean-christianity.html>
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: preventing “defectors - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kunming-steps-up-efforts-prevent-defectors-heading-south-korea/>

- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: prison camps and total control zones - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Prisons-of-North-Korea-English.pdf>
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: 2021 publication - https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Bermudez_KLS25_FINAL.pdf
- Christian communities and how they are affected: returning - <http://https://apnews.com/d04acf4a138545b692ebd530d832c218/Missionaries-at-border-spread-Christianity-to-North-Korea>

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / North Korea

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

North Korea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	96	1
WWL 2023	98	1
WWL 2022	96	2
WWL 2021	94	1
WWL 2020	94	1

From WWL 2002 to WWL 2021, North Korea had consistently ranked No. 1. In WWL 2023, it returned to the top after a hiatus in WWL 2022, when the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan led to an unprecedented spike in persecution. North Korea retains its spot at the top in WWL 2024 with pressure in all Spheres of life remaining at the maximum level and no changes observed. The violence score decreased minimally, but this should not be mistaken for an improving situation, but rather as evidence for the challenges involved in obtaining reports:. The widely reported arrest of a family of Christians in April 2023 illustrates that the price of being a Christian in North Korea is still high. With the 'Anti-reactionary thought law' in force (enacted in December 2020), Christians continue to be arrested and brought to labor camps.

Persecution engines

North Korea: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all

North Korea: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Dictatorial paranoia - DPA (Very strong)

Since 1948, North Korea has been ruled by a single family, now in the third generation. As mentioned above, while originally Communist ideology was followed, this influence has almost faded away in recent years, although the Communist style of controlling society and administering the country lives on. North Korea is now a clear example of a country ruled by *Dictatorial paranoia*. Everyone has to revere the leadership and because of this personality cult, Kim Jong Un is an irreplaceable figure in society - not least because he heads the Worker's Party, the army, the country's administration and all strands of society.

In 2018, the first signs of a [growing personality cult](#) surrounding Kim Jong Un were to be observed (Daily NK, 12 November 2018). The [first official painting](#) of Kim Jong Un was unveiled in November 2018, when Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Cane visited Pyongyang (BBC News, 6 November 2018). The painting shows Kim Jong Un dressed in a dark suit and tie, not in a Communist-style uniform. In 2023, he reportedly approved the first [paintings of himself](#) to be shown at a state art exhibition (NK News, 26 July 2023), which may reflect his growing confidence in ruling North Korea. The full title of Kim Jong Un sounds impressive: "Dear Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army". Kim Jong Un amended the national oath by shortening references to his father's and grandfather's achievements and giving extra emphasis to [his own accomplishments](#), clearly showing his consolidation of power (The Telegraph, 23 June 2018). In October 2017, Kim Jong Un promoted his sister to the Party's politburo, allowing her to become part of the country's ruling elite. This emphasizes the North Korean reality where ruling the country and Party is [family business](#), even though it does not mean that she has any real power of her own (NK News, 23 May 2018).

On several occasions in 2020, it was noticeable how Kim Jong Un failed to mention his father's or grandfather's beneficial work for North Korea and even skipped visiting their 'shrines' on such an important day as the 'Day of the Sun', the highest celebration in the country's calendar. This shows how much Kim Jong Un has consolidated his power and that no one can challenge his authority. The fact that Kim Jong Un [skipped the remembrance ceremony](#) for his father's birthday for the first time in 2023, simply sending a bouquet of flowers instead of attending in

person, shows how much his rule seems consolidated (NK News, 18 February 2023). The continuing speculation about the leader's health also shows something of the unique position Kim Jong Un holds. This shift is also seen in North Korean documentaries, in which Kim Jong Un is not only depicted as being hard-working, but as giving everything for the country, portraying him even limping as an illustration of his sacrificial effort (Reuters, 1 February 2022); his father and grandfather would never have been shown in such a condition.

The god-like worship of the rulers leaves absolutely no room for any other religion and anyone daring to revere anything or anybody besides the Kim dynasty in general - and Kim Jong Un in particular - is seen as dangerous and a threat to the state. Christians are therefore categorized as belonging to the 'hostile class' in North Korea's population classification system.

Communist and post-Communist oppression - CPCO (Very strong)

While in theory North Korea is still a Communist country, in practice a personality cult around the Kim family dominates. However, since the country is still run according to Communist administrative customs, CPCO is still indicated as the main engine, but it can be seen as being blended with (perhaps even eclipsed by) *Dictatorial paranoia*. Additionally, the emphasis of its leader (and the means by which the country is ruled) is shifting away from the army and more towards the Korea's Workers Party, illustrated in the parade for the 75th anniversary of the Party in October 2020, which prominently displayed the "Party's Army". This shows as well that (Post-)Communism still holds a strong influence. The outcome of the 7th Congress of the Korea's Workers Party in May 2016 – the first for 36 years – did not change anything visibly for either economic or ideological issues. Declaring itself a "nuclear weapons state" in 2022 has to be seen as a big achievement, from the perspective of CPCO ("see how strong our state is") as well as from the perspective of *Dictatorial paranoia* (in terms of safety of the leader and personal prestige). Christians not only continue to be seen as dangerous and their religion as “opium for the people” – as in classical Communist ideology – but they are also part of the hostile class, according to the country's social stratification system called *Songbun*.

Drivers of persecution

North Korea: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
						VERY STRONG		VERY STRONG	
Government officials						Very strong		Very strong	
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs						Strong		Strong	
One's own (extended) family						Strong		Strong	
Political parties						Very strong		Very strong	

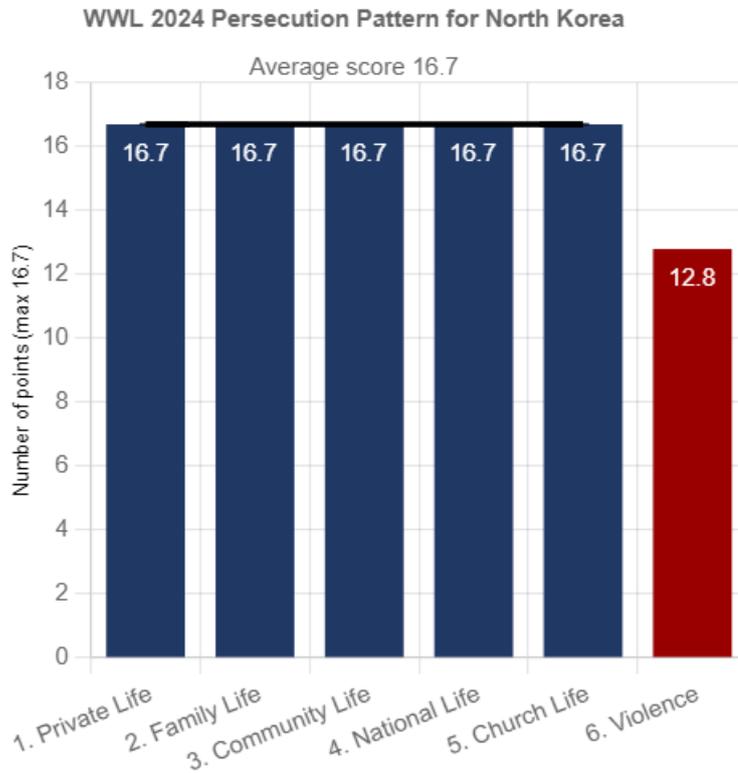
The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

The persecution engines *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Communist and post-Communist oppression* operate so closely that they are almost blended into one. For this reason, their drivers are presented here together.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia and Communist and post-Communist oppression

- **Government officials (Very strong):** The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state, in the form of government as in the Ministry of State Security or the Ministry of Social Security and the Workers Party of Korea (WPK). The government is run according to Communist doctrine and consequently, the government is the strongest driver of persecution in this respect. For three generations, everything in the country has been focused on revering the Kim family leaders. This naturally continued when Kim Jong Un took over power in December 2011. The highest goal of all authorities is the survival of the country and its leader.
- **Political parties (Very strong):** The Workers Party of Korea (WPK) is the tool with which Kim Jong Un has tightened his grip on North Korea. Since he decided to change the 'Military first' policy, the WPK has gained in importance, reflecting the Communist roots of the apparatus. The WPK's rules and decisions are implemented, and Christians are regarded as enemies in the Party's ideology. They are also portrayed as a Trojan horse for terrorist activities.
- **Normal citizens (Strong):** Christians are seen as hostile elements in society and traitors which need to be eradicated in one way or another. Due to the constant indoctrination permeating the whole country, neighbors, colleagues and everyone else are watchful and are expected to report suspicious activities to the authorities, not least through the network of neighborhood informers.
- **(Extended) Family (Strong):** Even own family members are known to report a Christian to the authorities. Children, in particular, are influenced by the indoctrination constantly being taught at school and elsewhere and can believe it so strongly that they report their own parents, convinced that they are doing something good and right. Therefore, many parents prefer not to tell their children anything about their Christian faith, at least until their teenage years.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for North Korea shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in North Korea has stayed at maximum level over all *spheres of life*. Despite the regime's changing style of communication over recent years, each *sphere of life* has retained the maximum possible score of 16.7 points. Neither the diplomatic offensive in recent years, nor any multilateral pressure brought any benefit or relief to Christians in the country.
- This pattern of maximum scores in all *spheres of life* reflects the reality of a state where the Persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia* is evident in every segment of society. There is probably no other country on earth where the term paranoia fits better; it affects everything in North Korea and it increasingly focuses on Kim Jong Un himself. And even with this extremely high level of pressure, the 'Anti-reactionary thought law' puts another layer of restrictions on Christians.
- The violence score decreased to a still extreme level of 12.8 points in WWL 2024. However, this should not be mistaken for an improving situation, but rather as evidence for the difficulties in obtaining reports. If a North Korean citizen is discovered to be a Christian, he or she will be arrested, interrogated, brought to a prison camp and/or killed.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points)

Simply possessing the Bible is considered a political crime against the nation and the leadership, confirmed by the new 'Anti-reactionary thought law'. North Korean police and intelligence agents search homes without warning; such searches are done in a systematic way and normally occur once or twice a year. If they find Christian materials, the owners and their family can be banished, taken to a prison camp and potentially executed. The RFA report of April 2023 referred to above is a chilling example of this policy.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)

Aside from the official 'show-churches' in Pyongyang, any Christian activity - and even suspicion of or association with Christian activity (e.g., wearing a cross) - remains completely impermissible in the DPRK. Displaying Christian images or symbols would be considered a suicidal act, as it is honoring something (or rather someone) else than the Kim family on whom all reverence should be focused, centered on Kim Jong Un himself. Displaying symbols other than the ones issued by the state honoring the Kim family on one's clothing would be seen as insubordination and highly dangerous. In trade with China, there were reports in the recent past that from time-to-time company trademarks resembling a cross or a plus sign were censored. As one country expert summed up in one sentence: "Every act of worship not aimed at Kim Jong Un is seen as an act of extreme disloyalty."

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (4.00 points)

North Korea tries hard to control all broadcasting and media. People who access any unapproved media or broadcasting can be punished. Although this is possible and done by some citizens in the border regions, it comes at a very high risk. According to one country expert, an estimated 20% of North Korean citizens follow foreign broadcasting by radio and the regime has started a campaign to weed out all exposure to such broadcasts by meting out harsh punishments. This campaign intensified in the WWL 2024 reporting period. The regime considers radio receivers as something highly dangerous, let alone a smartphone or the Internet. Therefore, listening to Christian radio is a very dangerous act. If Christians dare to do so, they will only listen well-hidden at nighttime, constantly on the alert for checks by the security forces.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (4.00 points)

North Koreans are immersed in "Kimilsungism" from the nursery upwards in compulsory education courses. People are trained that they must report anyone who is against the Great Leader and the regime, because such people are anti-revolutionary and dangerous enemies. Family members are no exception, and they have a strong incentive for reporting, as they may avoid the guilt-by-association principle. Especially children can be influenced by teachers to denounce their parents if they see them behaving contrary to what they have learned. As one country expert stated: "It is well documented that NK teachers in nursery, primary and secondary schools do periodically engage in rather subtle questioning techniques with their students to ascertain if Christian books are present or dissemination of faith is going on in the homes of students." Therefore, it is very dangerous to speak about Christianity to family members and many Christians wait for years until they find the right moment. In the case of speaking to children about their faith, parents will often wait until their children are teenagers. Even minors are not spared consequences from violating the '[Anti-reactionary thought law](#)', which is an illustration of how strongly the regime aims at controlling even the thoughts of its citizens (DailyNK, 18 April 2022).

Block 1: Additional information

Given the situation outlined above, it is not surprising that North Korea scores maximum points in the Private sphere. It is highly dangerous to read the Bible or to express one's Christian faith in any way whatsoever, even by just bowing one's head with eyes closed. Christians tend to divide Christian materials up (or destroy them) after memorizing the content in order to avoid storing whole copies. Meeting with other Christians is also highly dangerous, even outside of residential areas, as surveillance is ubiquitous and neglecting this duty is punishable. Frequently, Christians neither know nor trust one another; there is always the worry that someone purporting to be Christian could in reality be a spy.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (4.00 points)

Baptisms as the clearest and most visible proof of Christian faith are impossible to conduct openly in North Korea. If a baptism is exposed, those baptized and those carrying out the baptism are arrested and punished severely by being sent to a prison camp or executed. Consequently, baptisms are rarely carried out and never publicly.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (4.00 points)

It is highly dangerous for parents to share their Christian faith with their children. In fact, their own children are among the most dangerous people for them. Open Christian education is impossible, as the children are indoctrinated by the state, starting from a very young age, literally from the cradle. A country expert described the situation as follows: Children are taught and "raised primarily as a citizen of the Kim regime, and secondarily as being a member of an

individual family. Hence, parental terms are often associated with the Kim ruling family to further this perception and a de-emphasis on usual nuclear family influence, which would include the raising of a child with religious convictions." Parents have to take what one observer called a "passive approach". This may happen, for example, by trying to share biblical stories by telling them disguised as fairy tales, thus indirectly teaching them Christian norms and values.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (4.00 points)

The most important subject in all North Korean education up to the tertiary level is "Kimilsungism". All levels of education (from nursery to university) have special subjects about the Kim dynasty. Even in other subjects such as Korean, English and History etc. glorious episodes about the Kims are used as study texts. According to the study materials, Christianity is a subversive ideology from American Imperialists, and all Christians are traitors to the nation and spies of the enemy. Children are also urged from a very young age to join very politicized youth organizations such as the Young Pioneers which further emphasize state ideology and demonize religious faith as anti-revolutionary, disloyal and a tool of Western imperialism. The regime not only uses the normal curriculum for spreading such propaganda, but also a range of media (textbooks, animations, musicals, etc.) to distort the image of Christians and Christianity. Even in the PhD study curriculum for a subject like Nuclear Physics, 30% of the coursework involves the study of Juche ideology, called "ethics instruction".

Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (4.00 points)

Normally, when a Christian is exposed, there are no requests for divorce as by virtue of the guilt-by-association principle the whole family is interrogated and brought to a camp. According to the testimonies of North Korean refugees, in some cases, it seems possible that the parents of the non-believing spouse try to rescue their son or daughter by forcibly divorcing the couple and eliminating all records about the relationship with the arrested Christian in an effort to maintain their *Songbun*. But this is only possible where the non-Christian spouse's parents are high-ranking officials or have enough power; that is a rare exception and has no guarantee of success. Divorce may also take place in cases where the spouse tries to avoid the guilt-by-association principle before his/her Christian faith is revealed.

Block 2: Additional information

The maximum score in this sphere of life is reflected in one commentator's statement: "Even for pre-schoolers, it is about shaping their perceptions and worldview at a very tender age". If Christians are discovered, they will lose everything, so in many cases the questions asked in Block 2 are not applicable to the situation in North Korea, as the consequences are so much severer. Christians will not only be interrogated to find out about their networks, their families (even across generations) will also be arrested due to the guilt-by-association principle, and all will face years of misery in labor camps. Families are deliberately broken up if someone's faith is discovered. If both husband and wife are Christians, they may be sent to different labor camps. Celebrating Christian weddings, funerals or a Communion service openly is out of the question.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)

All exposed Christians who are not executed are placed under the strongest surveillance in remote mountain areas or prison camps. The national intelligence agency (Ministry of State Security/State Security Department) often cracks down on suspected people without any warrant or explanation. Even people who are not Christians but just have Christian relatives suffer from tight surveillance and lower *Songbun*. Despite the dire economic situation of the country, the importation of expensive surveillance equipment continued, facilitated by the warming relations with China and Russia. Everyone is under strict social control as North Korea applies the Communist neighborhood watch system called *inminban*. Everything that happens within a housing unit will be reported to the authorities by trained neighbors, so that virtually no activity, no visit - basically no deviation whatsoever - will pass unnoted

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (4.00 points)

All residents of North Korea are required to participate in the ubiquitous activities of the Juche ideology, including bowing to statues of the Kim family on the way to and from work, home or school and in praising and worshipping the Kim dynasty. Christians (whose faith has remained undiscovered) have to participate in such daily practices (as well as in the national ceremonies) for their survival. Absentees are under suspicion of being potential reactionaries and can be targeted for comprehensive investigation. The weekly self-criticism and study sessions should be seen under this Block 3.5 aspect as well. Christians who are discovered, are interrogated and brought to the camps where the pressure to renounce their faith would continue, although by different means.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (4.00 points)

Anyone related to a Christian would have a *Songbun* classification preventing them from access to good schools, the army and the ruling Workers' Party, or have already been banned under the guilt-by-association principle. One country expert describes their place in society as being "persona non grata". Exposed Christians cannot access any courses in education because they are forcefully isolated from society by the government, e.g., in labor camps or total control zones. Even people who just have Christian ancestors or relatives experience disadvantages and limitations in their education, even if they make it to university level.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

Random interrogation by the police or secret service is common in North Korea. All North Koreans can be targeted, the purpose being to root out any 'anti-socialist activities' or 'anti-revolutionary acts'. This makes Christians very vulnerable to exposure since one of the purposes

of the interrogation is to discover 'Christian spies'. Moreover, people monitor their neighbors and report to the authorities when they find something suspicious. The interrogation (and related torture) is one of the main aspects feared by escapees from North Korea, when they are forcefully repatriated, according to one country expert.

Block 3: Additional information

Christians need to be cautious wherever they are, not just at home. Similar caution is necessary in the workplace, which in the most cases is state-owned and assigned, and especially in all self-criticism sessions.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Article 68 of the 1972 Constitution (revised in 1998) states that citizens of North Korea “have freedom of religious beliefs”. It continues: “This right is granted by approving the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies.” However, “no one may use religion as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State and social order.” And Article 3 says that “the DPRK is guided in its activities by the Juche idea, a world outlook centered on people, a revolutionary ideology for achieving the independence of the masses of people.” Juche is an “immortal” idea, introduced by the country’s founding leader, Kim Il Sung.

The Preamble to the Constitution enshrines Kim Il Sung’s place in the nation, stating: “The great leader Comrade Kim Il Sung is the sun of the nation and the lodestar of the reunification of the fatherland. Comrade Kim Il Sung set the reunification of the country as the nation’s supreme task and devoted all his work and endeavors entirely to its realization. ... The DPRK and the entire Korean people will uphold the great leader Comrade Kim Il Sung as the eternal President of the Republic, defend and carry forward his ideas and exploits and complete the Juche revolution under the leadership of the Workers’ Party of Korea.”

Other laws like the Criminal Law or the already mentioned new 'Anti-reactionary thought law' also render freedom of religion meaningless. More important for the functioning of the state are the '10 Principles of Monolithic Ideology' of the Workers Party. These statutes are the actual governing principles of the NK government and society. Based on teachings of founding father Kim Il Sung, these rules are shaped to ensure the unwavering loyalty of the body politic to the Supreme Leader (*Suryong*) and the Korean Workers Party (KWP).

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

There are no other organizations than the Korean Workers Party and its front organizations, which can hardly be called civil society organizations in the traditional meaning of the word. Even when leaders of the few state-approved show-churches in Pyongyang hold their meetings, the Kim badge they are obliged to wear shows where their true and - according to the Party - only loyalty should be.

Block 4.13: Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups. (4.00 points)

Christians are perceived as and accused of acting against the leader and the country. Christians are described as reactionary, anti-revolutionaries, spies of American imperialists, and national traitors. A country expert made a significant comparison: "If one interprets Kim-ism as a kind of quasi-religion, then Christians in North Korea are attacked with the same kind of vehemence that, say, radical Islamists would accuse a Muslim who converted to Christianity." The difference is that the NK-regime would not use the category "blasphemy", however, they are treated like and dealt with as apostates.

Block 4.15: Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment. (4.00 points)

To begin with, most Christians will never stand trial since they are simply arbitrarily arrested and punished without any trial. But even if there were occasionally trials, no equal or fair treatment can ever take place because the courts exist to uphold and "justify" the Party's - or more precisely, the leader's - will. Of the very few people who stood trial in North Korea and managed to get out of the country later on, it was reported that they did not **even** know who their lawyer was. Foreign Christians who have faced court proceedings have been deprived of equal treatment and been held in prolonged arbitrary detention. On top of this, Christians are not accused of ordinary crimes, but of political crimes, so they cannot expect anything resembling due process at all.

Block 4: Additional information

Everything is aligned with the ideologies of Juche and "Kimilsungism" (as explained above). Consequently, the National sphere scores maximum points for pressure. North Korean police and border patrol officials will hunt down and vigorously prosecute North Koreans who convert to Protestant Christianity while in China or those who attempt to bring Christian literature back with them to North Korea. Every defector caught and repatriated has to answer many questions. All reports confirm that these interrogations include questions like: "Did you meet any Christians in China?" and "Have you visited a church in China?". The large group of North Koreans who have been repatriated from China in 2023 have to answer similar questions.

According to the Korean Institute for National Unification (quoted by the US State Department IRFR 2022 North Korea, page 16): "Authorities continued to educate citizens at least twice a year in ways to detect individuals spreading Christianity. The report noted that punishments for defectors who were forcibly returned to the country were harsher for those who were in contact with Christians in the PRC."

A country expert pointed out: "All North Korean media is under government control. Christians are demonized as robbers, swindlers, spies of the American enemy, and traitors to the nation. Not only the mass media but also school textbooks and other published books, movies, official documents, and ideology study materials describe Christians in a negative manner."

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

All church activities are illegal in North Korea except for the services held in the official show-churches in Pyongyang by the Korean Christian Fellowship which act as 'evidence' for the country's freedom of religion. The RFA report of a raid against a Christian gathering in April 2023 illustrates how quickly the authorities act, once meetings are discovered.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

The regime is especially interested in targeting and exposing the leaders of the underground church groups, as they are considered prime agents of anti-government activities and are punished more severely as a result. When a Christian leader is caught, in most cases a whole network of Christian believers can be traced and destroyed. Even when leaders take precautionary measures (such as not noting down names and addresses), the authorities are adept at extracting such information. A country expert sums up the situation of Christian leaders aptly: "The North Korean government considers church leaders to be far worse political criminals than ordinary believers and punish them more severely. They are likely to be executed in public as an example for authorities to warn residents. Their families are punished together and at least sent to political prison camps."

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

Any official importing of Christian material into North Korea is impossible. Foreign tourists are controlled to make sure they bring only one Bible for personal use and cannot leave it (or any other material - including leaflets) in North Korea. Apart from this, Bibles and other Christian materials are prohibited items and banned from entering and even from existing in the country (outside the official Pyongyang churches, where access is closely monitored). As it is impossible to produce Christian materials inside North Korea, Christians are known to treasure Bibles, hymn books and other Christian materials which were published before the foundation of DPRK as a separate state.

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

Speaking out against the instigators of persecution would mean speaking out against the Supreme Leader himself. Any statements or remarks against the regime or the Workers Party and the leader are totally forbidden and must be considered a suicidal action.

Block 5: Additional information

Non-official churches cannot exist in a visible fashion. There are four government-controlled church buildings in Pyongyang but these are used by the regime to convince international visi-

tors that freedom of religion exists: One is Catholic, two are Protestant, and one is Russian Orthodox. These do not function as church congregations in the true sense of the word and do not have any space to move beyond the limits set by the government. The same is true for the legal training of church leaders: According to a possibly outdated note by the US State Department (IRFR 2012), a [seminary](#) of sorts exists in Pyongyang, but churches are not allowed to train their leaders or ministers freely. Church youthwork cannot be carried out at all.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse).

State intolerance of Christians in North Korea remains violent. There have been raids against Christians (including the already mentioned April 2023 report) and killings, but for security reasons no details can be published. It has also to be kept in mind how difficult it is to obtain reports from the labor camps, which have expanded considerably in size since Kim Jong Un took power at the end of 2011.

5 Year trends

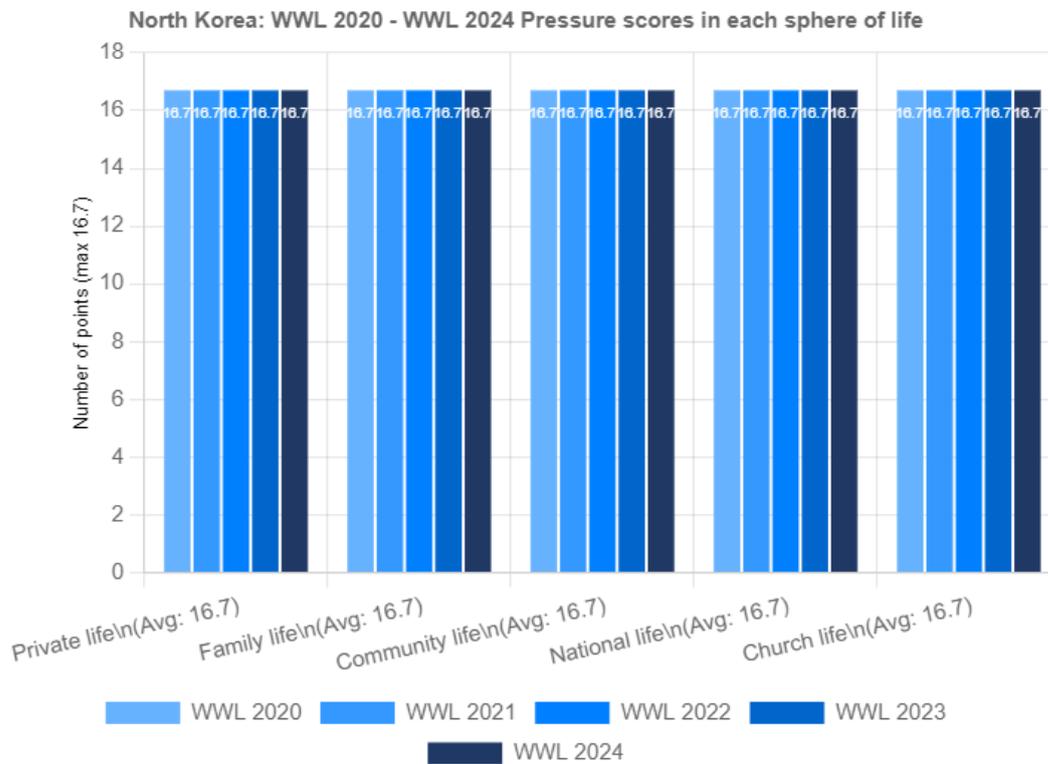
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

North Korea: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	16.7
2023	16.7
2022	16.7
2021	16.7
2020	16.7

In the chart above it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians stayed at the maximum level in the last five reporting periods, showing that Kim Jong Un is proving to be a worthy successor to his father and grandfather as far as violations of religious freedom (as well as the invention of tools for implementing such persecution) are concerned.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that extreme and maximum scores have become a fixed pattern in all spheres of life over the last 5 reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows a gradual increase in the score for violence since WWL 2020, reaching its highest level in WWL 2023. The decline of the violence score in WWL 2024 should not be mistaken as an improvement of the situation or as a decrease in actual violence; it is more a reflection of the difficulties in obtaining reports from the country.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Abduction; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

An estimated 80% of all North Korean defectors are women, many North Korean women and girls who flee to China for safety are then subject to trafficking, rape and sexual slavery in the “Red Zone” ([DW, 2023](#), “North Korean Girls exploited in China’s Red Zone”). They may face repeated trafficking, and a continuous cycle of violence from those who purchased them.

In North Korea, tens of thousands of Christians are in labor camps for their faith, where repatriated female defectors and prisoners in DPRK labor camps remain especially vulnerable to sexual violence and rape during the interrogation process, as well as daily prison life. One country expert summarized: “Christian female prisoners are exposed to more severe sexual violence ... because Christian prisoners are treated worse than normal criminals; they are not even considered as human beings.”

These assaults likely represent a mere fraction of the total abuse committed against Christian women in any given year, as North Korean authorities understand the importance of sexual purity in Christian values, and tactically use sexual abuse to intimidate and humiliate. A [report on the human rights violations against women](#) in the DPRK highlights that rape, other sexual violence and torture in detention facilities of women is endemic, and guards are known to sexually abuse or exploit female prisoners (UN 2020 report, “Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”). In addition, sexual harassment and sexual violence against women has become part of everyday life in North Korea, with women holding no power to resist or report this abuse ([HRW, 2018 report](#), “You cry at night but you don’t know why”).

Sources also report the practice of forced abortions, particularly for forcibly-repatriated female refugees, including Christians. A country expert shared: “Forcibly repatriated female refugees are, at times, subject to the horrific action of forced abortion by DPRK border authorities [due] to the nation’s race-based ideology, thereby preventing, from their point of view, ‘Chinese blood’ from entering the North Korean gene pool”. This may be carried out by border guards or in prisons. Such an experience is physically, emotionally and spiritually devastating.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

The patriarchal society of North Korea means that state monitoring and control over the population is especially focused on the male heads of the household. All male adults must belong to workplaces allocated by the government. They have to confirm their attendance at work and cannot stop working for any private reason, making it harder for them to flee the country than women. Job allocation, freedom of movement and quality of life aligns with the *Songbun* social status system, with Christians at the bottom of the pile, viewed as enemies of the state ([HRW, North Korea's Caste System](#), 2016).

Commenting on the differences between persecution of men and women, a country expert shared that authorities actively sought to focus on Christian male heads of household, with the 'three generation' rule of punishment being applied harshly to men and boys in the family: "There is a testimony from a former North Korean officer that guilt-by-association is applied mainly to the patriarchal bloodline, so the sons of Christians are punished more severely than the Christians' wife and daughters."

The mandatory 10-year military conscription (starting at 17 for male youths) always forces the issue of whether someone has a connection to Christianity in their family history. If such a connection is found, then preferred forms of military service are disallowed. Likewise, those with an identifiable Christian connection are consigned to the lowest positions within universities and workplaces and are denied party membership. Christian men also suffer maltreatment and physical abuse within the context of labor camps.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 North Korea, p.18/19):

- "According to Korea Future, persons who practiced Shamanism were often subject to arrest. The government hung posters and issued directives warning citizens against engaging in 'superstitious acts'. These directives were posted in apartment blocks. Korea Future stated that both ordinary citizens and officials illicitly practiced Shamanism. Investigators documented many persons engaging both publicly and privately in Shamanistic practices, including traditional rituals, fortune telling, physiognomy (reading the fate of an individual based on facial features), exorcism, use of talismans, use of birth charts, and tarot cards. One source told RFA it was common for individuals to consult fortune tellers before planning weddings, making business deals, handling health matters,

or considering other important decisions. Another source told Asia Press that government officials also consulted fortune tellers about their health and careers. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of Shamanism.“

Further information:

- Although the worship of the North Korean leadership in theory leaves no room for any other religion, followers of Buddhism and Confucianism are known to exist in the country. However, these religions belong to the cultural mind-set of the region and are basically lived out privately without drawing any attention from the authorities.
- The difference between Christian faith (as an organized religion) and 'superstition' is described in a 2021 USCIRF report as follows: "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." (USCIRF: "[Organized persecution - Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea](#)", August 2021, p.24).
- There have also been reports about violations of the rights of the [Falun Gong](#) movement in North Korea (RFA, 17 May 2019). This not only fits the regime's anti-religious ideology but also has the side-effect of pleasing China, which also cracks down on this movement heavily.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia blended with Communist and post-Communist oppression

Persecution, discrimination and intolerance resulting from these two Persecution engines is fanned by a growing ideology of self-reliance and self-confidence, now that the regime has declared its status as being that of a nuclear power. This new confidence has been illustrated in the displays of the latest generation of ballistic missiles in October 2020 and their frequent testing since 2022, along with the first launch of a spy satellite in 2023. Kim Jong Un strengthened his rule after managing to get what none of his predecessors ever achieved, a meeting with a ruling US president. However, the country faces unprecedented challenges, not least because the spread of the COVID-19 virus finally became too evident to be ignored. The 'ghost disease', as North Koreans called it, led to a strict border closure with China, which - although now lifted - badly harmed the already battered economy. The changing geo-political situation means that North Korea's (self-)isolation has now been replaced with an opening-up to selected partners such as China and Russia, who provide a lifeline, especially in terms of providing grain and other foodstuffs. Kim Jong Un is presented to a North Korean audience as a benevolent leader who is working until exhaustion to improve their lives. The aid provided by those partner countries will likely embolden the leadership. This and the continued use of the 'Anti-reactionary thought law' give a glimpse of what Christians (and all other minorities perceived as dangerous and hostile) can expect for the future.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: growing personality cult - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/efforts-ramp-up-to-promote-kim-jong-un-personality-cult/>
- Persecution engines description: first official painting - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46106393>
- Persecution engines description: paintings of himself - <https://www.nknews.org/2023/07/kim-jong-un-approves-first-paintings-of-himself-in-boost-to-personality-cult/>
- Persecution engines description: his own accomplishments - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/23/kim-jong-un-introduces-new-mandatory-national-oath-erasing-father/>
- Persecution engines description: family business - <https://www.nknews.org/2018/05/what-will-become-of-kim-yo-jong/>
- Persecution engines description: skipped the remembrance ceremony - <file:///C:/Users/davidat/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/Content.Outlook/T6U7OLF/Content.Outlook/T6U7OLF/Kim%20Jong%20Un%20appears%20to%20skip%20ceremony%20for%20father%E2%80%99s%20birthday%20for%20first%20time%20%7C%20NK%20News>
- Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (4.00 points): Anti-reactionary thought law - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-issues-orders-regarding-young-violators-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>
- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: seminary - <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/eap/208238.htm>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: DW, 2023 - <https://www.dw.com/en/north-korean-girls-exploited-in-chinas-red-zone-report/a-65137209>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: report on the human rights violations against women - https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: HRW, 2018 report - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/02/you-cry-night-dont-know-why/sexual-violence-against-women-north-korea>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: HRW, North Korea's Caste System - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/05/north-koreas-caste-system>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Organized persecution - Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-08/2021%20Organized%20Persecution%20-%20Documenting%20Religious%20Freedom%20Violations%20in%20North%20Korea.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Falun Gong - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-falun-gong-05172019164536.html>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=North+Korea>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.