

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
1

North Korea



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

There is no freedom of religion or belief in North Korea. The regime keeps a watchful eye on all citizens. If Christians are discovered, they and their families are deported to labor camps as political criminals or killed on the spot. Gathering with other Christians is therefore almost impossible and must only be attempted in the utmost secrecy. “The worship of the leaders became ever more important over the years and, with its constant indoctrination, warnings about “superstitions” and religions (without naming them as such) became more important as well (USCIRF, “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience in North Korea”, 29 July 2022).

The “[anti-reactionary thought law](#)”, enacted in 2020, included the Bible among the banned books mentioned in Article 28, showing that Christianity is still seen by the state as a grave danger.

Quick facts

LEADER

State Affairs Commission President Kim Jong Un

POPULATION

25,991,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

400,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Agnosticism

GOVERNMENT

Single-party dictatorship



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	400,000	1.5
Agnostics	14,869,170	57.2
Atheists	3,933,747	15.1
Others	3,289,819	12.7

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source¹

Communist since independence in 1945, it quickly became clear that North Korea would not be governed by collective leadership but by one man, Kim Il Sung. Kimilsungism, worship of the ruling family, prevails. Kim Il Sung died in 1994 and was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Il, who was succeeded after his death in 2011 by his son, Kim Jong Un. Kim Jong Un holds all the key positions which allows him to control the parliament, government and military. He wants North Korea to be taken seriously and has worked to advance its rocket and nuclear technology, keeping the world aware of its existence. After successfully mastering ballistic and nuclear tests, Kim Jong Un began a diplomatic offensive, meeting with the South Korean, Russian, Chinese and United States (US) presidents. The fact that Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Kim Jong Un five times in 15 months between March 2018 and June 2019 shows that China is most

likely North Korea's closest and only ally.

The first meeting between a North Korean leader and a sitting US president took place in Singapore in June 2018, followed by another in Hanoi in February 2019. Outcomes were minimal. In June 2019, Donald Trump became the first US president to step on North Korean soil since the Korean War. A [last-minute](#) meeting took place between President Trump, Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. After the meeting, it was announced that talks would resume concerning North Korea's nuclear program and the lifting of international sanctions, but there has not yet been a follow-up meeting.

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 unspecified "fever". He immediately mobilized the armed forces to support the country's health institutions (notoriously fragile even before the arrival of the pandemic).

The risk of serious food shortages has led to fears that a situation could develop reminiscent of the 1990s' famine, when hundreds of thousands of North Koreans crossed the border to China to find food for survival. However, now that most diplomats and staff of international organizations have left the country, an accurate assessment is impossible. A report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the DPRK from October 2021 stated that [starvation](#) has become a real risk because of the tightly-sealed border with China. In theory, women and girls are legally

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022) (*Adapted according to OD-estimate*)

protected from gender inequality. Rape, trafficking, sexual abuse and domestic violence are [illegal](#). However, violence against women is [prevalent](#). Military service is compulsory for men and women.

Kimilsungism is the prescribed national religion. All citizens must attend weekly self-criticism sessions and memorize more than 100 pages of ideological material. There is no reliable data on religion. There are followers of Buddhism and Confucianism, whose philosophies are easier to follow internally without anyone noticing. Christianity is seen as a dangerous foreign religion that must be fought against. Christians and their descendants are classed as 'hostile'. Many Christians fled during the Korean War (1950-1953) and tens of thousands were killed, imprisoned or banished to remote areas. Today's Christians are either heirs of pre-Korean War Christians or among the tens of thousands who traveled to China during the North Korean famine of the 1990s, where they found faith in Chinese churches.

Economically, North Korea is struggling under sanctions. Lifting these sanctions has been the central goal of North Korean diplomacy, and an important economic initiative has been to send migrant workers to other countries. Education is mandatory, and the country reportedly has one of the highest literacy rates in the world. Boys and girls are given different curricula, designed according to traditional gender roles. The [informal private sector](#) is growing, especially in larger cities. However, in February 2021 the KWP Congress decided to rein in the freewheeling private sector and bring back (more) state control, which will lead to recentralization of economic policy.

Influenced by Confucianism, North Korea developed a social classification system called Songbun, under which every citizen is divided into three classes; the core (28% of society), the wavering (45%) and the hostile (27%). Christians and their descendants are classed as hostile. Women are afforded equality in legislation, but are considered subservient to men. The number of people with internet access is estimated to be in the tens of thousands, and each is carefully selected and supervised.

North Korea's nuclear capability, although debated, causes international tension, especially for neighboring China. The UN Security Council agreed on strong economic sanctions, although there are indications that China has been easing its compliance. 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. Reports say that North Korean Secret Service agents are infiltrating churches in China. 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. Open Doors estimates that tens of thousands of Christians are in labor camps. A 2020 UN report highlighted human rights violations against women in these camps, which include sexual violence, forced nudity, rape and forced abortion. Christian men also experience physical violence and maltreatment within labor camps.



How the situation varies by region

There are no hotspots of violations of religious freedom in North Korea in the classical meaning of the word. Insurgency is unthinkable, and the regime keeps a watchful eye on all citizens. The various forms of [prison camps and total control zones](#) can be seen as areas where Christians are facing the most difficulties. Reportedly, Kim Jong Un has [expanded](#) the system of prison camps considerably.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

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. Christians are classified under the “hostile” classes of the social system called Songbun and even have two sub-classes 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. Only a small percentage of the historical Christian communities were able to hide their faith and form an underground church. Due to the guilt-by-association principle, the descendants of those Christians face insurmountable social and other obstacles and are watched with suspicion.

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.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Communist and post-Communist oppression:

Although North Korea is dominated by the personality cult of its leaders, it is still run according to Communist customs and societal control. Religion is seen as dangerous and Christians are part of the hostile class, according to Songbun, the country’s social stratification system.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The god-like status of the leaders dominates society. Kim Jong Un amended the national oath to shorten references to his father’s and grandfather’s achievements and give extra emphasis to his own. On several occasions in 2020, Kim Jong Un failed to acknowledge his father or grandfather and even skipped visiting their ‘shrines’ on the Day of the Sun, the highest celebration in the country’s calendar. This shows how much he has consolidated his power. The two sources operate so closely together that they almost blend into one. The main perpetrators of both sources are government officials and the Workers’ Party of Korea, followed by citizens and extended family. Continuing speculations about the leader’s health also show the unique position Kim Jong Un holds.

The highest goal of the authorities is the survival of the country and its leader. The Workers’ Party has gained importance since Kim Jong Un decided to change the previous “military first” policy. As for citizens, neighbors are on the lookout for any suspicious behavior to report to the authorities. Citizens often do not act out of their own convictions, but because of a mix of being constantly brainwashed and fear/intimidation. Even a Christian’s family members have been known to inform on a relative, which leads to a high number of Christians who practice their faith in secret.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Tens of thousands of North Korean Christians are in labor camps for their faith, where female prisoners suffer from sexual violence and rape. An estimated 80% of all defectors are women, and many North Korean women who defect to China are subject to human trafficking. Given recently improved North Korea-China relations, cooperation between the North Korean intelligence agency and Chinese police has strengthened, resulting in increased repatriations of North Korean defectors. Furthermore, since 2014, military service is mandatory for females - a notoriously controlling environment, opposed to all religious practice.

- Imprisonment by the government
- Trafficking
- Violence – sexual

MEN

The patriarchal society of North Korea means that state monitoring of the population is especially focused on the male heads of households. All male adults must belong to workplaces allocated by the government. They must confirm their attendance at work and cannot stop working for any private reason. Those with an identifiable Christian connection are consigned to the lowest positions in the military (military service is 10 years for men), in universities and workplaces, and they are denied party membership. Men also suffer maltreatment and physical abuse in labor camps.

- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business

- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – physical

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	1	98
2022	2	96
2021	1	94
2020	1	94
2019	1	94

North Korea had been No. 1 on the WWL since 2002, with a hiatus in WWL 2022, when the takeover of the government by the Taliban in Afghanistan led to an unprecedented spike in persecution. The pressure in all spheres of life remains at the maximum level, no change has been observed. With the new 'anti-reactionary thought law', which may also have been a reaction to the long-denied existence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, the number of arrests of Christians and of house churches closed increased again as the government does not seem to have been distracted as much by the pandemic as previously thought. Consequently, the violence score and the overall score increased respectively by 1.3 points.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons no details can be published here.

Private life

Police and intelligence agents search homes without warning. If they find Christian materials, it is considered a crime against the nation, and the whole family can be banished, imprisoned, or executed. Those who use an unregistered smartphone or radio to access unapproved media are punished. Christians only dare to listen to radio programs at night, hidden under blankets. Citizens are trained to report anyone who might be an enemy of the regime, including family members. Teachers encourage pupils to denounce their parents if they see them behaving contrary to what they have learned. Because of this danger, Christian parents often wait until their children are teenagers before speaking to them about their faith.

Family life

Baptisms cannot be openly conducted because doing so would result in imprisonment or execution. As we saw in Private Life, sharing faith with one's children is very risky. Christians will try to share Bible stories disguised as fairy tales. Some North Korean refugees have told us that when a Christian is exposed, if a non-Christian spouse has high-ranking parents, they may attempt to forcibly divorce the couple and eliminate all records of the relationship. Otherwise, the whole family is interrogated and imprisoned due to the guilt-by-association principle. Kimilsungism is the most important subject from nursery to university. Even in a Ph.D. curriculum for a subject such as Nuclear Physics, 30% of the coursework involves the study of Juche ideology. Christianity is portrayed as a subversive ideology from American imperialists; Christians are viewed as traitors to the nation and spies.

Community life

North Korea applies inminban, the Communist neighborhood watch system. All that happens within a housing unit will be reported to the authorities. Random interrogation by the police or secret service is common for all citizens. One of its purposes is to discover Christians, who are then executed or sent to prison camps or remote mountain areas. 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. Those with Christian relatives are closely monitored and prevented from accessing good schools, the army, and the Workers' Party. All

North Koreans must bow to statues on the way to and from work or school and participate in practices such as self-criticism sessions and national ceremonies.

National life

The new anti-reactionary thought law together with Article 68 of the Constitution states that citizens "have freedom of religious beliefs" but that "no one may use religion as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State and social order." More important than the constitution or the functioning of the state are the 10 Principles of Monolithic Ideology statutes of the Workers' Party. These are the governing principles of the NK government and society. Based on the 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). The national media broadcast anti-Christian content, where Christians are portrayed as evil betrayers of the nation and missionary activities are referred to as "acts of terrorism". Christians are arbitrarily arrested and punished without trial. Even foreign Christians who have faced court proceedings have been deprived of equal treatment and held in prolonged arbitrary detention.

Church life

All church activities are illegal in North Korea except for the services held in Pyongyang's official churches, which are attended by tourists as "evidence" of North Korea's freedom of religion. There have been cases where underground church groups were discovered and Christians were sent to camps or killed. Details cannot be published for security reasons. The regime is especially interested in finding leaders, punishing them, and interrogating them about the rest of the network. Tourists entering and leaving North Korea have their luggage checked to make sure they only bring in one Bible for personal use and that they do not leave it there. Import and production of Christian material is banned. According to the 2021 North Korean Human Rights White Paper of the Korean Institution of National Unification (KINU), public executions are becoming more frequent just for possessing a Bible. Distribution of Bibles is more harshly punished than possession. North Koreans cannot leave the country without government permission, which means attending conferences or meeting other Christians abroad cannot happen.

International obligations & rights violated

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 into 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)



Situation of other religious minorities

Although worship of the North Korean leadership in theory leaves no room for religion, followers of Buddhism and Confucianism are known to exist. However, these religions belong to the Asian cultural mindset and can be followed privately.

'Superstitious activity' (understood to mean fortune-telling) is banned. However, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have reported an increase in this, for example before planning a wedding or making a business deal.

There have also been reports about the violation of the rights of the Falun Gong movement. This pleases the Chinese Government, which is known to crack down heavily on Falun Gong followers.



Open Doors in North Korea

Open Doors' goal has always been to 'strengthen what remains and is about to die' (Rev 3:2). This verse is especially applicable for the situation of the North Korean Church. Without our support, many Christians would starve to death. The scope of work focused on in North Korea includes the following:

- Supplying persecuted North Korean believers through Open Doors networks in China with emergency relief aid (food, medicines, clothes, etc.)
- Training through radio broadcasting
- Providing shelter, training, and training materials to North Korean believers in China (who often travel back to NK)

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
