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# North Korea: Full Country Dossier

January 2022



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2022

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Woman in North Korea (c) Open Doors International

# Introduction

## World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

## Note on publication of this dossier

Please note that in the case of North Korea, the publication of the Full Country Dossier does not carry ‘Field endorsement’.

## Note on copyright

This document remains the property of 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: © 2021 Open Doors International.

## 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 2022 reporting period was 1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

## Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

## External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

# WWL 2022 Situation in brief / North Korea

## Map of country



## Brief country details

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

North Korea: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
25,951,000	400,000	OD estimate

North Korea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	96	2
WWL 2021	94	1
WWL 2020	94	1
WWL 2019	94	1
WWL 2018	94	1

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

If North Korean Christians are discovered - no matter if they are heirs of the Christian communities from before the Korean War or if 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) – not only are they deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, their families will share their fate as well. 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. A new 'anti-reactionary thought law' makes it amply clear in its Article 28 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

For security reasons, no specific examples can be given.

## 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>



# WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / North Korea

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/north-korea/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/north-korea/</a>	14 July 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929</a>	14 July 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-PRK.html">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-PRK.html</a>	14 July 2021
CIA World Factbook (North Korea not included)	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/</a>	
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf</a>	14 July 2021
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	14 July 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index (North Korea not included)	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-korea/freedom-world/2021">https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-korea/freedom-world/2021</a>	14 July 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report (North Korea not included)	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Garda World country report	Garda World	<a href="https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/north-korea">https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/north-korea</a>	14 July 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/north-korea">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/north-korea</a>	14 July 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm">https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm</a>	
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/north-korea">https://rsf.org/en/north-korea</a>	14 July 2021
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/north-korea">https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/north-korea</a>	14 July 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (North Korea not included)	HDI 2020	<a href="http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries">http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries</a>	
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2020	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/</a>	14 July 2021
USCIRF 2021 country reports	USCIRF 2021	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/North%20Korea%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf">https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/North%20Korea%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf</a>	14 July 2021
World Bank country profile	World Bank country profile	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=PRK">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=PRK</a>	14 July 2021

## 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 be less pronounced in recent years). The other is “Kimilsungism”, the worship of the leaders who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea and helping it flourish, without interference from outside forces. While the army still plays an important role for the leadership, its political importance has [diminished](#) in recent years (Reuters, 8 July 2021).

The country wants to be taken seriously and it wants to be 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 WWL 2020 reporting period. However, it did not lead to concrete results or relief from international sanctions and the emphasis on self-reliance and the country's strength. The latter is shown by its weapon development, which filled the content of the [speech](#)

given by Kim Jong Un at the 75th anniversary of the Korean Workers Party in 2020 (38 North, 13 October 2020).

Although North Korea still claims not to have any COVID-19 cases, it has been hard hit by the pandemic and decisions related with it. The decision to close all borders with China had harsh consequences for an already fragile economy and also for society at large. The country's health system has been notoriously fragile even before the arrival of the pandemic. Allegedly connected to the pandemic was the recent execution of a high-ranking military officer for referring to an order given by Kim Jong Un as '[unrealistic](#)'. He had said this after the leader reportedly ordered military food stores to be opened and food rations to be distributed to the general public (DailyNK, 2 August 2021). Apparently, this was 'unrealistic' since the stores in question were either empty or did not even exist anymore.

The small Christian minority in North Korea continues to hide itself carefully, especially now as political tensions are growing again. Such times have always proved to be times where security is particularly tight and Christians are seen as enemies of both the leadership and society in general. (For a detailed [report](#) with interviews of survivors of imprisonment and torture see USCIRF, "Organized Persecution: Documenting Religious Freedom violations in North Korea", August 2021.) In terms of general human rights, it is unrealistic to hope that North Korea will [engage](#) with the international community in a meaningful way concerning Human Rights in the upcoming reporting cycle of the Universal Periodic Review at the UN (38North, 2 September 2021).

## Political and legal landscape

Kim Jong Un has been demonstrating a different style of leadership from his father, although his ultimate goal of seeking respect and safety for his regime may 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 leadership. The way he became [visibly emotional](#) during his speech at the 75th anniversary of the Workers Party is another indication of his different style (Reuters, 12 October 2020). 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 now 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 and rocket tests. Nevertheless, informal private economy flourished and helped the country and its people to survive, but that was before the borders with China were closed due to COVID-19. After successfully mastering ballistic and nuclear tests, Kim Jong Un started what could be called a

'diplomatic offensive', beginning with a meeting with the Chinese president and secretary-general of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping. This change of course which has also led him to meet several times with the US president and the South Korean president and once with the Russian president, 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, acknowledges the fact 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 of the country or ease the international tension. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, the overall relations seem to have [warmed 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).

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). The fact that it was she who announced this step and that her brother had been absent from public view for some time in 2020, led to speculations about the leader's health ([heart surgery?](#)) and his sister's role as a potential successor (Daily NK, 21 April 2020). Such speculation usually proves [fruitless](#) (KINU, 6 July 2020), given the opaqueness of the leadership system; besides, Kim Jong Un made it very clear who was calling the shots when he put [planned military action](#) against South Korea on hold (38North, 25 June 2020). Another example was 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 does not need formal titles for wielding influence, due to her familial affiliation.

The recent creation of a First Secretary of the Workers Party has led to the question whether Kim Jong Un is [learning to delegate](#) (Associated Press, 9 June 2021). While the short answer would be 'no', it does seem to be the case that North Korea's leader is trying to free up time from working at his desk. Some long-time observers think this may be connected to Kim Jong Un's health and be a [preparatory measure](#) in case of a temporary or permanent incapacitation (NK News, 16 June 2021). The question then, of course, arises as to who would step up 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 recent 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 (compare Trend 4 below).

North Korean authorities ordered the [expansion](#) of the political prison camp system during the recent Eighth Party Congress (DailyNK, 19 February 2021) and while several camps had been closed or merged over the last years, it is only recently, since the imposition of COVID-19 quarantine measures, that the prison population has swelled due to quarantine offenders landing in political prison camps. The order for expanding the prison system is probably meant

as a response to the recently announced '[anti-reactionary thought law](#)' (WWR, 28 January 2021). The authorities appear to be preparing for a strict implementation of these measures and this may well mean that Christians will come under even stronger pressure, given that owning a Bible and being a Christian were explicitly mentioned in the law. According to several sources, the [number of inmates](#) in the political prison camps has risen by at least 20,000 since March 2020 (DailyNK, 28 July 2021).

This illustrates 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. Thus, it has once again become harder to get information out of the reclusive country and support its Christians. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic 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.

North Korea is notoriously restrictive of its citizens' freedom. On paper the country 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 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2001. Domestic violence is also outlawed under the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women. According to Human Rights Watch however, violence against women, domestic violence and rape are prevalent across the country (HRW 2021). 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.

## 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 April 2021) lists the number of Buddhists at just over 387,000. The 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 practically means 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 the [education](#) of North Korea's pre-schoolers were announced in August 2020 and lessons about 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 (Radio Free Asia - RFA, 13 July 2021). 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, although 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 to be even recognized as being a Christian. In March 2019, Moscow Orthodox Patriarch Kirill announced his [plans to visit Pyongyang](#) and its recently built Orthodox church, but more than two years later, this visit has not taken place (Asia News, 5 March 2019).

## Economic landscape

No reliable economic data is available; the UNDP 2020 report does not include North Korea in its analysis and the World Bank only issues a limited country profile.

The country needs international aid, but the regime restricts direct access to its citizens in need and is under international sanctions. 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 is in existence, especially in the larger cities (Daily NK, 22 August 2017), 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). Additionally, not least due to the political situation, North Korea's economy is dependent on big neighbor China.

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).

Up to the time of finalizing this country dossier in November 2021, North Korea still denies having any citizens testing positive for COVID-19 infection, a claim hardly credible when looking at the pandemic spreading in South Korea. It is difficult to say how much the pandemic has affected the country, but a recent [public berating](#) of officials for failures and the closedown of schools are signs that the pandemic is active in North Korea, too (BBC News, 30 June 2021). While Kim Jong Un himself had previously spoken of challenges regarding the food situation, the term '[food crisis](#)' had so far been avoided. Now, a pro-North Korean paper in South Korea, explicitly used this term in a report on the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK congress which may point to the unusual difficulties the country is facing, triggered by natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. Normally, such statements would only speak of 'food shortages' or 'problems'. The population is being kept in the dark 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.

All North Korean men are assigned workplaces by the government and their attendance is strictly controlled, even if they [do not get paid](#) (The Guardian, 14 February 2015). Free from government-assigned positions, women have greater freedom to assume the role of main actors in the marketplace; a [2015 report](#) indicated that women earn more household income than men (Reuters, 25 May, 2015), which can lead to social tension.

## Social and cultural landscape

Little reliable data is available; the UNDP 2020 report, CIA Factbook and UN Global Human Development Indicators do not include North Korea in their analysis. The World Bank country profile does contain a limited amount of information, but all numbers have to be treated with caution:

- **Life expectancy at birth:** 72.3 years
- **Health:** 19.1% of all children under five years of age have a prevalence of stunting. 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:** 0.8%

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 report published in the WWL 2022 reporting period, [one fifth](#) of North Korean children under five suffer from stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition (NK News, 5 May 2021). 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 must be (NK News, 15 June 2021). A report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the DPRK stated that [starvation](#) has become a real risk because of the tightly sealed border with China (Reuters, 7 October 2021). 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.

North Korea's strong control system 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. Boys and girls are even given different curricula, designed according to traditional gender roles ([The Borgen Project, 9 May 2018](#)). According to a 2019 report, the numerous sanctions placed on North Korea by foreign powers compound the vulnerabilities of women. It notes that the ensuing economic pressures exacerbate domestic

violence, sexual violence and trafficking ([Korea Peace Now, October 2019](#)). The COVID-19 crisis has reportedly further exacerbated economic and social pressures in North Korea ([Deutsche Welle, 12 April 2021](#)).

## Technological landscape

Reliable data is again hard to come by when considering the technological context. Internet World Stats 2021 does not include North Korea in its analysis. Also, Freedom House does not rate North Korea in its "Freedom on the Net" reports.

According to the data in the World Bank country profile (which has many gaps as well), an estimated 15 out of every 100 people held cell phone subscriptions in 2017. A more recent report puts this [number](#) at 18% (Joong Ang Daily, 11 August 2020). 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 bringing 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 is equipped with 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 "38 North" 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 Pyongyang to a young international audience (NK News, 18 May 2020).

North Korea has experienced what one observer described as a "[revolution](#)" in TV media, since more TV channels have now become available for the general public, although all still state-run (38North, 16 December 2020). Indeed, the technological landscape is probably the area which has seen the strongest development and changes 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 to 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 have been shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had an influence on the numbers for 2020, as only 229 people made it out of North Korea in that year. While the first quarter of 2020 saw 135 escapees making it to South Korea, the next quarters saw a [drop](#) to 12, 48 and 34 respectively (Yonhap, 20 January 2021). 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).

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. 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).

It is estimated by Open Doors that tens of thousands of Christians are in labor camps. 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. Christians who flee North Korea or become Christians in third countries or China are also under threat of being captured and returned, where they face severe punishment. 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. Christian men, too, experience physical violence and maltreatment within labor

camps. Escaping these atrocious conditions has become reportedly more difficult over recent years, particularly within the context of COVID-19 ([BBC News, December 2020](#)). China restarted its [forced repatriation](#) policy in the WWL 2022 reporting period despite the pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 22 July 2021). 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, opposed to all religious practice - although the length of service of around 5 years is shorter than for males ([The Guardian, 31 January 2015](#)).

## Trends analysis

### 1) Surviving COVID-19 by all means possible

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. This policy has been called by one long-time observer as the "[tried, tested and failed ways](#)" of the regime (NK News, 9 April 2021). Into this pattern, the expansion of the labor camp system and the introduction of the 'anti-reactionary thought law' with a special reference to Christians, fit all too well. The fact that the regime staunchly denies any infections by COVID-19 shows that state ideology is perceived as being more important than anything else and Christians have to prepare for even harder times, as strengthening the ideology always goes hand in hand with crackdowns on any real or perceived threats and dissent.

### 2) Increasing isolation

Due to the pandemic and related restrictions, the already small international community in North Korea - and thus, contact points with the outside world - have become even smaller. Many embassies have been closed down completely and in December 2020, the last [workers](#) of the International Committee of the Red Cross left Pyongyang (Reuters, 3 December 2020). North

Korea has chosen a policy of increasing diplomatic and economic [isolation](#) (National Bureau of Asian Research, 21 May 2021), and even if reports claiming that a [new 'arduous march'](#) has started may be exaggerated (38North, 13 July 2021), the situation is dire. In mid-July 2021, there were only eleven embassies remaining and although their number of staff is not public knowledge, it is very likely that staff-levels have been reduced considerably (NK News, 13 July 2021). Consequently, any improvements in terms of human rights, would be happening in very tiny steps, if at all (HRNK, Human Rights in the DPRK - The role of the [United Nations](#), 1 July 2021). Christians thus remain in hiding, trying to survive, just as they have done over the last decades.

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.

### 3) Increasing self-confidence amidst warming ties with China

While China may be unhappy with the regime's behavior and its ideology of self-reliance, it still has many reasons to keep North Korea afloat. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, 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). Nevertheless, China will keep North Korea afloat for the following reasons:

- 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;
- After any form of re-unification, it is likely that US troops would be stationed directly at China's border;
- Xi Jinping's June 2019 visit could well have been motivated by the escalating US-China trade war, with President Xi's presence in Pyongyang intended as a [warning](#) to the USA (38North, 25 June 2019).

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.

### 4) Another year of leadership speculation

Kim Jong Un had longer times of absence in 2021 again, and when he re-appeared in public, his obvious loss of weight led to much speculation about the leader's health, even though he is not yet forty years old (NK News, 8 June 2021). Even a mere bandage or a "[mysterious spot](#)" led 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. As his children are still too young to rule,

analysts focus on his sister who is now included in the speculation game: The fact that she was [not included](#) in a list of the politburo members after the 8th Workers Party Congress led to a flurry of speculation (AP News, 13 January 2021), but later on she delivered a "[colorful statement](#)" on the annual US-South Korean military exercises (38North, 16 March 2021). All such speculation should be read with a great portion of caution, however. A reminder of the risk of easy misinterpretation could be seen in February 2020 when Kim Jong Un's aunt, Kim Kyong Hui, [re-appeared for the first time in public in six years](#) (Daily NK, 5 February 2020). It was widely believed that she had been purged alongside her husband, Jang Son Taek, when he fell from grace in 2013. As far as the leadership is concerned, North Korea often remains a mystery. This much seems to be clear, however: The regime will do everything necessary to stay in control and speculation about the future - also within the country, not just 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 personal worship - are likely to become even more dangerous in the coming months and years.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: diminished - <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN2EE0D1>
- Recent history: speech - <https://www.38north.org/2020/10/kjuspeech101320/>
- Recent history: unrealistic - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/high-ranking-north-korean-military-official-executed-calling-kim-jong-un-special-order-unrealistic/>
- Recent history: report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/organized-persecution-documenting-religious-freedom-violations-north-korea>
- Recent history: engage - <https://www.38north.org/2021/09/scrutinizing-north-koreas-record-on-civil-and-political-rights-the-new-iccpr-reporting-cycle/>
- Political and legal landscape: visibly emotional - <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN26X1UH>
- Political and legal landscape: General Secretary - <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-north-korea-ff69c4291ba6d83f1585a4e4cb1a2a94>
- Political and legal landscape: June 2019 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/xi-jinping-north-korea-kim-jong-un-nuclear-trump-talks-g20>
- Political and legal landscape: warmed again - <https://jamestown.org/program/lips-and-teeth-the-enduring-china-north-korea-relationship/>
- Political and legal landscape: demolition - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-53060620>
- Political and legal landscape: heart surgery - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/source-kim-jong-un-recently-received-heart-surgery/>
- Political and legal landscape: fruitless - <http://www.kinu.or.kr/2020/eng/0706/co20-12e.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: planned military action - <https://www.38north.org/2020/06/military062520/>
- Political and legal landscape: not been given - <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN29FOOD>
- Political and legal landscape: learning to delegate - <https://apnews.com/article/kim-jong-un-donald-trump-north-korea-business-d8ecf74ca00649cb8cf6949d59dfb8fc>
- Political and legal landscape: preparatory measure - <https://www.nknews.org/2021/06/north-koreas-ruling-party-rule-revisions-presage-trouble-at-the-top/>
- Political and legal landscape: lost weight - <https://www.nknews.org/2021/06/kim-jong-un-looks-thinner-and-intelligence-agencies-are-likely-paying-attention/>
- Political and legal landscape: expansion - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-orders-expansion-political-prison-camp-system/>
- Political and legal landscape: anti-reactionary thought law - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/north-korea-keeping-all-south-korean-and-christian-influence-at-bay/>
- Political and legal landscape: number of inmates - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/number-inmates-north-korean-political-prisons-increased-at-least-20000-since-march-2020/>
- Political and legal landscape: The Criminal Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea - [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/The%20Criminal%20Law%20of%20the%20Democratic%20Republic%20of%20Korea\\_2009\\_%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/The%20Criminal%20Law%20of%20the%20Democratic%20Republic%20of%20Korea_2009_%20(1).pdf)
- Religious landscape description: education - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kim-yo-jong-updates-greatness-education-curriculum-preschools/>
- Religious landscape description: two hours a day - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/acts-07132021215939.html>
- Religious landscape description: met with their North Korean counterparts - <https://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/north-and-south-korean-church-leaders-share-table-issue-call-to-lift-sanctions-on-dprk/60567.htm>
- Religious landscape description: plans to visit Pyongyang - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Patriarch-Kirill-will-visit-North-Korea.-Russian-orthodoxy-in-the-East-46412.html>
- Economic landscape: private sector - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/daily-nk-releases-groundlevel-repo/>
- Economic landscape: empower women - <https://www.nkhiddengulag.org/blog/womens-evolving-role-in-north-koreas-jangmadang-generation>
- Economic landscape: state control - <https://www.38north.org/2021/02/kim-jong-uns-congress-report-more-economic-and-social-controls-on-the-horizon/>
- Economic landscape: recentralization - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/04/10/north-koreas-economy-is-recentralised-and-china-reliant/>

- Economic landscape: state-owned shops - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/markets-06032021152857.html>
- Economic landscape: The lifting of sanctions - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53059491>
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## WWL 2022: 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 northern Korea in 1886 they found a small community of Christians already there and a year 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. Before the Korean War there were about 500,000 Christians in North Korea. Just ten years later, there was no visible presence of them anymore.

### Church spectrum today

No list is available for publication.

### External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: 8,000 Catholics - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/february/korean-christianity.html>

# WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / North Korea

## Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

## Position on the World Watch List

North Korea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	96	2
WWL 2021	94	1
WWL 2020	94	1
WWL 2019	94	1
WWL 2018	94	1

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

North Korea had been No. 1 on the WWL since 2002, in WWL 2021 with a score of 94 points. 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 denied existence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, the number of arrests of Christians and of house-churches closed increased, as did the violence score and the overall score (respectively by two points). Despite this worsened situation, this unprecedented score of 96.4 points has been eclipsed by the developments in Afghanistan. Therefore these two countries swapped ranks.

## 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
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.*

### **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. 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. 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*.

### **Dictatorial paranoia (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 rules 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. 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. His sense of power was given a public boost during the military parade in October 2020, when North Korea displayed its new rocket launching systems for nuclear weapons, ce-

menting its de facto nuclear power status. The continuing speculation about the leader's health also shows something of the unique position Kim Jong Un holds.

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 system.

## 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. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.*

The Persecution engines *Communist and post-Communist oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* operate so closely that they are almost blended into one. Since it is difficult to distinguish them, their drivers are presented below together.

### Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression and Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Very strong):** The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state, in the form of government 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 which have 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, and especially children can believe in indoctrination taught in school and elsewhere 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.

## 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. The strict closure of the border due to COVID-19 fears has brought border crossings (both legal and illegal) to a halt. 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 information from these camps, particularly up-to-date details (see HRNK's frequent updates, e.g. the [most recent publication](#) on Political Prison Camp Kwan-li-so No.25, 30 September 2021). As already stated above (see: *Political and legal landscape*), the camp system has been considerably expanded during the WWL 2022 reporting period.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

There are neither communities of expatriate Christians 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:

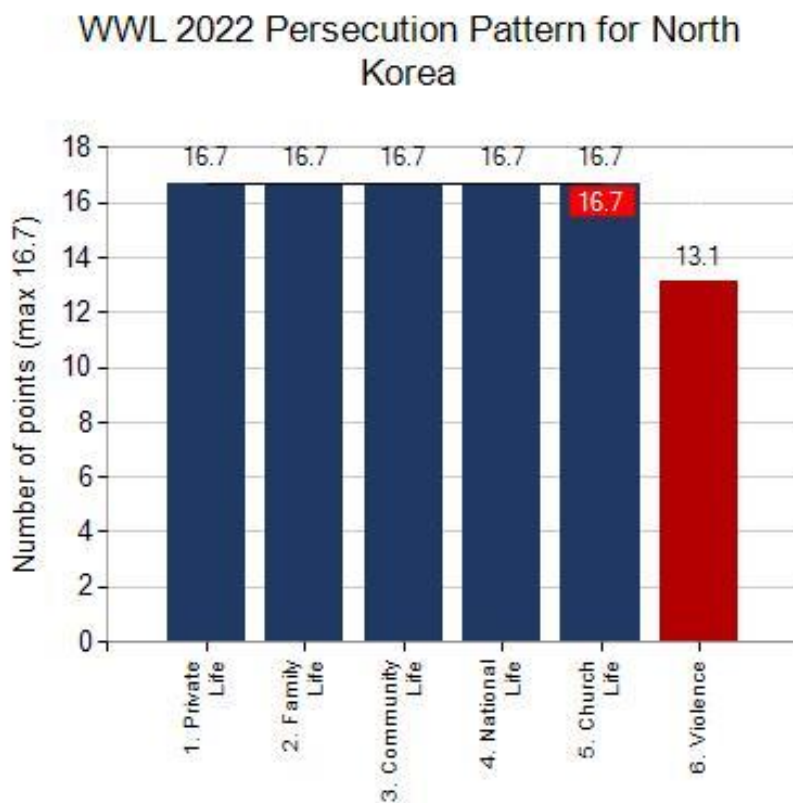
### Historical Christian communities

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. Every citizen is classified 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*. 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 (Associated Press, 5 April 2018).

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2022 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 the reporting period, 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 increased to an extreme level, reaching 13.1 points in WWL 2022. If someone is discovered as a Christian, he or she will be arrested, interrogated and brought to a prison camp. Several raids and subsequent killings have been reported, more than in WWL 2021.

## 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 2022 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 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.

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

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. Before trade with China was halted in the reporting period, there were even reports that from time to time trade marks resembling a cross or a plus sign were censored.

### **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. The regime considers radio receivers as something highly dangerous, let alone a smartphone or the Internet. People who possess unregistered radio receivers or smartphones can and will be punished. Therefore, listening to Christian radio is a very dangerous act. If Christians dare to do so, they will only listen at night time, hidden under blankets, being constantly on the alert for security force checks.

### **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 everyone who is against the Great Leader and the regime, as they are anti-revolutionary and dangerous. 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. 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. The new '[anti-reactionary thought law](#)' is an illustration how strongly the regime aims at controlling even the thoughts of its citizens (DailyNK, 15 December 2020).

### **Block 1 - further 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.*

## **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.

### **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. 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 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. 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 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, and it 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 - further 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. They 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 the country is in, the [importing of surveillance equipment](#) reportedly continued (DailyNK, 23 October 2020). Everyone is under strict social control as North Korea applies the Communist neighborhood watch system called *inminban*, whose local leaders have strong authority (38North, 10 December 2020). 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 on the way to and from work, home and school and in praising and worshipping the Kim dynasty. Christians have to participate in such daily practices (as well as in the national ceremonies) for their survival. Absentees are suspected as reactionaries and can become the target of a comprehensive investigation. The weekly self-criticism and study sessions should be seen under this aspect as well.

**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. 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 police or the secret service is common in North Korea. All North Koreans can be targeted, the purpose being to root out any 'anti-socialist activities' or '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 - further information***

*Christians need to be cautious wherever they are, not just at home. Similar caution is necessary in the workplace 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.

**Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (4.00 points)**

North Korean national media broadcast many anti-Christian programs which describe Christians or missionaries as disloyal, stupid, evil, spies, terrorists and betrayers of the nation. In DPRK state media, Christian activities are constantly referred to "acts of terrorism". Christians are likewise portrayed as allies of the USA and South Korea. Not only the mass media but also the school curriculum and government-published textbooks describe Christians in such a negative manner.

**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 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."

**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 know who their lawyer was. Even foreign Christians who have faced court proceedings have been deprived of equal treatment and been held in prolonged arbitrary detention.

**Block 4 - further 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?" According to the Korean Institute for Nation-*

*al Unification (quoted by the US State Department IRFR 2020, page 13): "Citizens continued to receive education from authorities at least twice a year that emphasized ways to detect individuals who engaged in spreading Christianity."*

## 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 church services held in the official churches in Pyongyang by the Korean Christian Fellowship; these act as 'evidence' for the country's freedom of religion. Although the authorities seem to have been pre-occupied to a certain extent with containing the pandemic, the new 'anti-reactionary thought law' shows how much emphasis the regime puts on ideological purity. Despite the challenges COVID-19 brought and continues to bring for North Korea, there have still been reports where underground church groups were discovered and Christians were brought into camps or killed as a result. Details cannot be published for security reasons.

### **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-national 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 a church completely destroyed. Even when leaders take precautionary measures (such as not noting down names and addresses), the authorities are adept at extracting such information.

### **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). 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 and the leader are totally forbidden and must be considered a suicidal action. This was illustrated in the WWL 2022 reporting period when even a high-ranking military officer was executed when he dared to question an order given by Kim Jong Un (see above: *Political landscape*).

### **Block 5 - further 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 visitors 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).*

Persecution, discrimination and intolerance against Christians in North Korea remains violent. There have been raids against Christians 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**

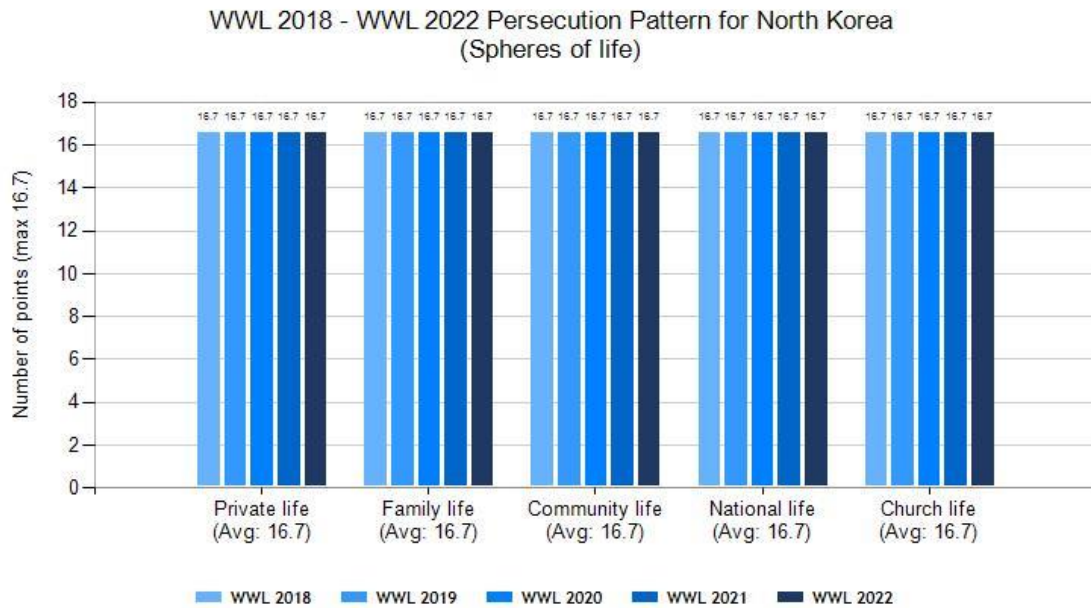
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### **5 Year trends: Average pressure**

<b>North Korea: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history</b>	<b>Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life</b>
2022	16.7
2021	16.7
2020	16.7
2019	16.7
2018	16.7

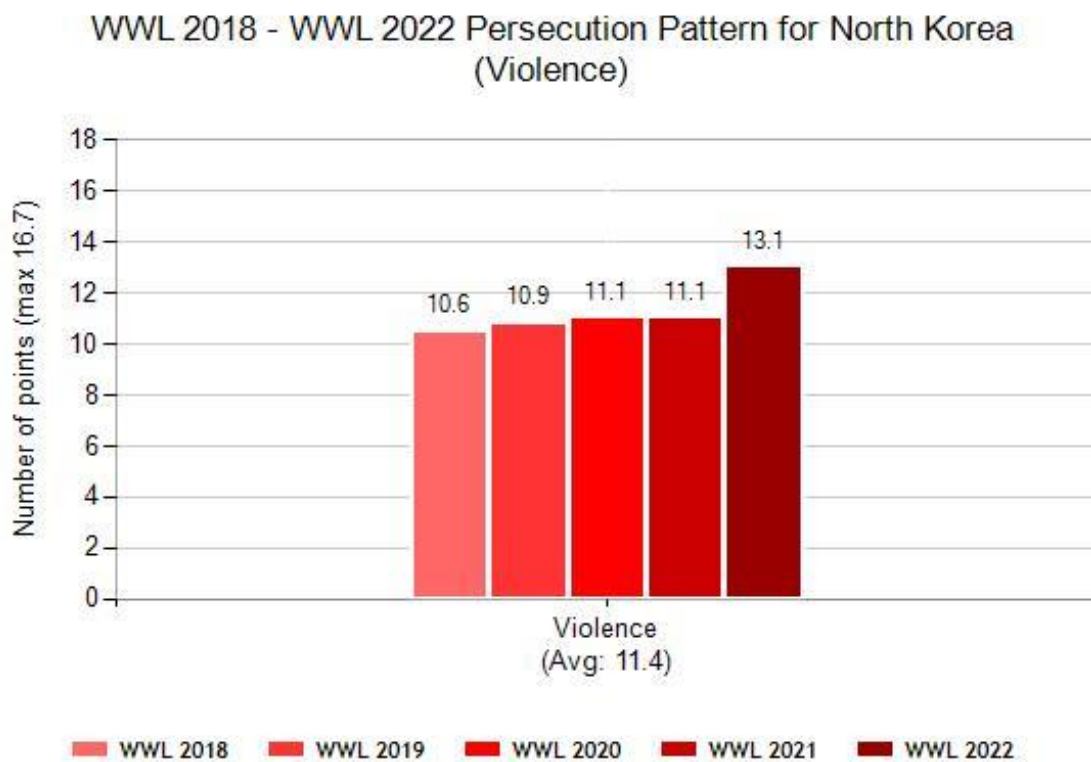
In the chart above it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians stayed at the maximum level in the last five reporting periods, showing that Kim Jong Un is proving to be a worthy successor to his father and grand-father as far as violations of religious freedom (as well as the invention of 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 score since WWL 2018, with violence reaching its highest level in WWL 2022, when a greater number of raids and Christians arrested were reported.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

North Korean escapees, the majority of whom are women, suffer from the fear of forced repatriation and severe interrogations, including torture. Others may face repeated trafficking, and a continuous cycle of violence and harassment from the Chinese who purchased them. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean repatriations were temporarily brought to a halt but have since resumed again ([RFA, 19 July 2021](#)).

Repatriated female defectors and prisoners in DPRK labor camps remain highly vulnerable to sexual violence during the interrogation process, as well as daily prison life. 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 July 2020 report: “Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”).

Sources indicate that rape has commonly been used during the questioning of female repatriated escapees. Due to the fall in repatriations caused by COVID-19 travel restrictions, such instances decreased, it must however be recognized that these assaults represent a mere fraction of the total rapes committed against Christian women in any given year. A country expert explains how sexual abuse is used as a tactic by the authorities to intimidate and humiliate Christian women: “They are well aware that Christian women and girls understand and accept the importance of sexual purity according to the Scriptures. Therefore, violating that purity is a very common way for Kim's authorities of showing contempt for Christian women and their beliefs, as well as to shame them into submission in the presence of others.” This sexual exploitation is enabled by a society which is culturally patriarchal; women are treated relatively poorly and are considered subservient to men.

The practice of forced abortions is also an ongoing issue for Christian women, particularly for repatriated North Korean refugee women made pregnant by a Chinese father (often the result of being a victim of human trafficking); there are many documented instances of North Korean border guards being instructed to carry out forced abortions to prevent the North Korean bloodline from being ‘defiled’ ([OCHCR, 2014, para 424ff](#)).

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; 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 attend workplaces allocated by the government. They have to confirm their attendance and cannot stop working for any private reason, making it harder for them to flee the country than women. This is because job allocation is a government system of controlling people.

Commenting on the differences between the persecution of male and female Christians, a country expert explained that the authorities actively seek to shame males: The “authorities emphasize how deficient men and boys are by putting their faith in Christ instead of offering wholehearted loyalty to the Kim regime and the Worker’s Party. Such a shaming tends to be more effective on male pride than females. In addition, because Korea has long been a culture in which shame, guilt and saving face have a very high social value, men and boys tend to be especially vulnerable to public shaming.”

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 2020, p.2):

- "NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures, including imprisonment, against the practice of shamanism and 'superstitious' activities. In September 2019, an NGO posted on social media a government video depicting Christians as 'religious fanatics' and “spies” and calling converts 'worthless people'. According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), authorities launched crackdowns on Falun Gong practitioners in 2019. According to NGOs, the government used religious organizations and facilities for external propaganda and political purposes."

#### 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.
- 'Superstitious activity' (understood to mean 'fortune-telling') has been banned. However, even members of the Party reportedly indulge in this, e.g. in an attempt to advance their career and because of the highly uncertain times. Consequently, one observer claims that the regime has failed in its "[witch hunt](#)" against magic and superstition (NK News, 13 September 2021).
- The difference between Christian faith (as an organized religion) and 'superstition' is described by USCIRF 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:

### **Communist and post-Communist oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia**

Persecution, discrimination and intolerance resulting from these engines is fanned by a growing ideology of self-reliance and self-confidence, now that the regime has gained the (unofficial) status of being a nuclear power, illustrated by displaying its latest generation of ballistic missiles in October 2020 and continued testing in the WWL 2022 reporting period. 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 of the COVID-19 crisis, although the pandemic is officially not present in the country. But the 'ghost disease', as North Koreans call it, has led to a strict border closure with China, badly harming the already battered economy and people's lives, not to mention the health system. Against this background, the fact that the Supreme Leader apologized to the people for having failed to improve their lives and even choked on his words at one point, while speaking at the 75th anniversary of the ruling Worker's Party in October 2020, was remarkable, but should not be misread as a change in policy. Increasing isolation (a deliberate regime policy) and the 'anti-reactionary thought law' are perfect illustrations 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: 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/>
- 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: most recent publication - [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Bermudez\\_KLS25\\_FINAL.pdf](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>
- 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/deep-dive-north-korea-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>
- 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): importing of surveillance equipment - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-imports-more-equipment-monitor-communications-along-border/>
- 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): inminban - <https://www.38north.org/2020/12/ddraudt121020/>
- 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: RFA, 19 July 2021 - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/repatriation-07192021195626.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: report - [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR\\_Violations\\_against\\_Women\\_DPRK\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf)
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: OCHCR, 2014, para 424ff - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: witch hunt - <https://www.nknews.org/2021/09/the-kim-regimes-failed-witch-hunt-against-magic-and-superstition/>
- 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 World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=North%20Korea>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/north-korea/>