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## North Korea: Country Dossier

November 2020



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

## Copyright notice

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- 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 2021 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 Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

## External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/> (password: freedom)

# WWL 2021 Short country profile / North Korea

## Brief country details

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

North Korea: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
25,841,000	400,000	OD estimate

North Korea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	94	1
WWL 2020	94	1
WWL 2019	94	1
WWL 2018	94	1
WWL 2017	92	1

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods*

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

*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. 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 published.

### External Links - Short country profile

- 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 2021: Keys to understanding / North Korea

### Link for general background information

- [North Korea country profile - BBC News](#)

### 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.

The country wants to be taken seriously and it wants to be heard internationally, which is one of the reasons why its leaders have strived to advance 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. After this, however, concrete results and changes have been lacking, the relationship deteriorated and North Korea stopped short of letting threats and aggressive actions escalate; the most serious action taken was the demolition of the liaison office with South Korea in Kaesong.



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.

## 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. Kim Jong Un has been proclaimed the “Great Successor” and 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.

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 flourishes and helps the country and its people to survive. 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 (see below), 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).

After the first meeting with a sitting US president (in Singapore in June 2018) created much hope, although the concrete outcome was rather meagre, a second meeting in Hanoi in February 2019 ended without even a final summit statement or press conference, showing the vastly different expectations on both sides concerning the lifting of international sanctions and the dismantling of nuclear weapons and associated programs. A surprise and almost impromptu [meeting](#) of US President Donald Trump, Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in at Panmunjon in June 2019, on the way back from the G20 summit in Osaka, made President Trump the first US president to step on North Korean soil since the Korean war (NK News, 30 June 2019). After the short meeting, it was announced that working-level talks would resume, an announcement which has not led to any concrete action. All further negotiations concerning the nuclear program and the lifting of international sanctions failed in 2019 and it is unlikely that they will succeed in the foreseeable future; a deadline for talks set by North Korea for the end of the year 2019 passed without any action being taken.

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 speculations usually prove [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.

If anything, the situation for Christians has become even more difficult, as the "honeymoon" of international diplomacy ended and control 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 (Human Rights Watch, 1 Nov 2018, "You Cry at Night but Don't Know Why"). 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 means of religious persecution. Military service is compulsory for both men and women in North Korea; Men must serve ten years whilst women must serve until the age of 23. Those with an identifiable Christian connection are denied preferred forms of military service.

## 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 February 2020) lists the number of Buddhists at 390,000. The categories "Ethno-religionist" and "Other" (which includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist and Zoroastrian) are listed at 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. Reportedly, approximately 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).

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 Orthodox church, but up to the finalizing of this report in November 2020, this visit has not taken place (AsiaNews, 5 March 2019).

## Economic landscape

No reliable economic data is available; the UNDP 2019 report and World Bank country overview do not include North Korea in their analysis.

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. However, a growing informal [private sector](#) with markets is in existence, especially in the larger cities (Daily NK, 22 August 2017). The local population is getting increasingly used to this sort of trading, which helps them to survive; in theory such trading runs counter to the country's teaching but seems to have become accepted as a necessary evil and occurs countrywide, albeit with the help of bribes and informal taxes. Those markets also [empower women](#), as they are usually the ones running the business, as men are expected to show up at their state-organized workplaces, even though markets are promising a higher profit (NK Hidden Gulag, 25 August 2020).

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 preventing this way of earning currency. [The lifting of sanctions](#) has been the central goal of all North Korean efforts in international diplomacy, but no such relief can be expected in the short-term (BBC News, 16 June 2020).

The importance of economic issues could be seen in the Annual People's Assembly, which [took place](#) in April 2020, focusing heavily on economic issues and self-reliance (38North, 13 April 2020). During the People's Assembly, it was again denied that North Korea had any cases of COVID-19, 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 and especially the economy, but the border closures must have had a strong effect. 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.

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 trump the well-being of its people (38North, 9 June 2020).

Education is mandatory for both boys and girls in North Korea; the country reportedly has one of the [highest literacy rates](#) in the world (The Borgen Project, 9 May 2018). Boys and girls are given different curricula however, designed according to traditional gender roles.

All North Korean men are assigned workplaces by the government and their attendance is strictly controlled, even if they [don't get paid](#) (The Guardian, 14 Feb 2015). If identified as Christians, men will be denied higher status positions in the workplace. 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), what can lead to social tensions.

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, Oct 2019, "The Human Cost and Gendered Impact of Sanctions on North Korea").

## Social and cultural landscape

Little reliable data is available; the UNDP 2019 report, World Fact Book and UN Global Human Development Indicators do not include North Korea in their analysis.

World Bank does publish a limited amount of information in its 2018 [country profile](#) (but all numbers have to be treated with caution):

- Life expectancy at birth is 72 years
- 9.3% of all children under five years of age suffer from underweight
- The forest area in North Korea is an estimated 49.000 sqm, a decline of 40% within just 30 years
- The urban population growth is 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%). These categories are further divided into 51 sub-classes. Christians and their descendants are recorded in the hostile class, they even hold two sub-classes on their own. This system remains in operation and still very much influences every day life, but reports from North Korea show that [bribes can make a difference](#) and cause officials to look the other way (NK News, 5 September 2019). However, 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. UN reports continue to show that millions of North Korean people suffer from chronic food insecurity (to various degrees), high malnutrition rates and deep-rooted economic problems. Young children, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly are particularly vulnerable.

In February 2019, Reuters reported that the regime admitted that the country was [facing a food crisis](#) and had therefore cut the rations distributed to its people from 550 grams a day to 300 grams. According to the same report, the UN estimated the number of citizens in need at 10.3 million and the level of undernourished people at 41%. In July 2020, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN [updated these numbers](#) and now estimates that 12.2 million people (47.6%) suffer from undernourishment. Reports that Kim Jong Un tapped into his [private food reserve](#) may show, if true, that the problem is larger than the regime admits (Business Insider, 15 August 2020). 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 from the World Bank data 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. Christians suffer from the dire situation as well and have the added danger of not just being classified as hostile (according to the Songbun) if their faith is discovered, but also 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 – women are considered socially subservient to men and treated as inferior. Men also suffer under this hierarchy, as are monitored closely to ensure they are regular and reliable members of the workforce. Their daily attendance at work is monitored with the highest scrutiny.

## Technological landscape

Reliable data is again hard to come by when considering the technological context. Internet World Stats does not include North Korea in its analysis. Also, Freedom House does not rate North Korea in its "Freedom on the Net 2020" report.

According to the 2018 data in the [World Bank Country Profile](#) for North Korea (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. 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 from 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. A report by HRNK from December 2019 titled "[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" by the regime was highlighted in a report from May 2020, explaining how [video blogs](#) are used to explain North Korea and especially Pyongyang to a young international audience.

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 or pop music. A vivid illustration of this is the report of a soldier who ran into trouble when being 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.

There are no available statistics on the breakdown of mobile and internet usage by gender.

## Security situation

Technically, North Korea is still at war with the United States of America, since only a ceasefire deal was reached at the end of the Korean War in 1953. Consequently, this is one of the issues on the table in the bilateral talks. As this issue is also connected with the presence of US troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula in South Korea, the matter 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 strong 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 crisis has had an influence on the numbers for 2020, according to a South Korean news agency, in the [first nine months](#) of 2020 a mere 195 people arrived from the North (Yonhap, 21 October 2020). 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. The [2020 UN report](#) (Human rights violations against women detained in the DPRK) 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.

## Trends analysis

### 1) Regime survival trumps all other considerations

When it comes to protecting its ideology, North Korea is not worried about its international reputation or even any diplomatic and economic fallout - as with Malaysia (following the presumed assassination of Kim Jong Un's half-brother in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017), which had been one of the few nations on relatively good terms with the country. Challenges like the [raid on the North Korean embassy](#) in Spain in February 2019 also occur and may serve the regime as reasons to lash out against perceived adversaries (El País, 22 April 2019). The fact that the regime staunchly denies any infections by COVID-19 shows that 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) Gloves off after a short diplomatic overture

The series of diplomatic surprises in 2018 and 2019 came to a crashing halt when the follow-up meetings in Hanoi and Vladivostok ended without a common declaration. North Korea set an ultimatum for negotiations and the lifting of sanctions by the end of 2019. When this date passed without any sign of sanctions being eased, North Korea's leadership turned back to the old and

well-tested method of coercion and issuing threats. This could be seen in the threats made by Kim Yo Jong and the demolition of the Kaesong liaison office in June 2020. And even if a surprise agreement was to be reached in secret, it would have no effect on the situation for Christians in the country as the focus would be on denuclearization and the lifting of sanctions, not on the human rights situation. Christians thus remain in hiding, trying to survive, just as they have done over the last decades.

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

While China may be unhappy with the regime's behavior, it still has many reasons to keep North Korea afloat and showed its strong position by making Kim Jong Un visit it four times in a very short time-span and gracing him with a fifth visit by President Xi in June 2019. China's reasons are: i) The unpredictability of any scenario if the Kim regime were to collapse; ii) the stability of the whole region and the question whether North Korea's nuclear weapons could be a potential danger for China itself; and iii) the fact that, after any form of re-unification, it is likely that US troops would be stationed directly at China's border; iv) the June 2019 visit could well have had more to do with 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 as has been testified by the continued crackdown on Christian ethnic Korean churches in China and South Korean missionaries being expelled by [China](#) (Christianity Today, 8 March 2017). A more technically sophisticated border control is also making unofficial contact with China much more difficult for Christians.

### 4) Leadership speculation

The prolonged absence of Kim Jong Un in the second quarter of 2020 led to much speculation about the leader's health (and a potential successor) even though he is not yet forty years old. The fact that he [was absent](#) from celebrating the most important day in North Korea, the Day of the Sun on 15 April, showed the seriousness of the matter (Channel News Asia, 17 April 2020). In April 2020, Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, was reinstated as a [member of the politburo](#) (The Guardian, 12 April 2020) and in June became an international figure through her open threats against South Korea. This led some to wonder if she had already entered the "[party center](#)" (NK News, 19 June 2020). 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 is often 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

- Link for general background information: North Korea country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929>



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- Political and legal landscape: meeting - <https://www.nknews.org/2019/06/north-korean-leader-meets-u-s-south-korean-presidents-at-panmunjom/>
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- Economic landscape: don't get paid - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/14/north-korean-sexism-women>
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## WWL 2021: 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 [8000 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 Peninsular 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 data is available for publication.

## External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: 8000 Catholics - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/february/korean-christianity.html>

# WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / North Korea

## Reporting period

01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

## Position on the World Watch List

North Korea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	94	1
WWL 2020	94	1
WWL 2019	94	1
WWL 2018	94	1
WWL 2017	92	1

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods*

North Korea has been No.1 since WWL 2002. Since WWL 2018, its point score has been very closely followed by Afghanistan at Rank 2. Although the situation for Christians in the two countries is very different, in terms of scoring they are similar. As in previous years, Christians in North Korea face extreme levels of pressure in all *spheres of life*, combined with a very high level of violence directed against them. The sudden increase in diplomatic activity (starting with

Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in South Korea in February 2018) came and passed without any tangible improvement for the people of North Korea. Notable changes in Kim Jong Un's style of communication have also not changed anything for Christians in the country. Police raids have continued with the aim of identifying and uprooting any citizens with deviating thoughts - including Christians.

## 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 (Very strong):

While in theory North Korea is still a Communist country, in practice a personality cult dominates. However, since the country is still run according to Communist administrative customs this 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 recent 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, whether concerning 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 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 October 2017, Kim Jong Un promoted his sister to the Party's politburo, allowing her to become part of the country's ruling elite. She was also the one attending the Winter Olympics in South Korea and took part in several summits. 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).

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, 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).

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, cementing its de facto nuclear power status.

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	-
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-	Strong	-
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-	Strong	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-	Very strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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 here 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 is focused on revering the Kim family leaders and this 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 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.

## Map of country



## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no hotspots of violations of religious freedom in North Korea in the classical meaning of the word. Insurgency is unthinkable and the regime keeps a watchful eye on all citizens. 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 receive information from these camps and up-to-date information is next to impossible (see HRNK's frequent updates, e.g. the [most recent one](#) about Long-term Prison-Labor Facility Kyo-hwa-so No.12 in Jongo-ri, 30 September 2020). Reportedly, Kim Jong Un has [expanded](#) the system of prison camps considerably (Daily NK, 10 August 2020).

## 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:

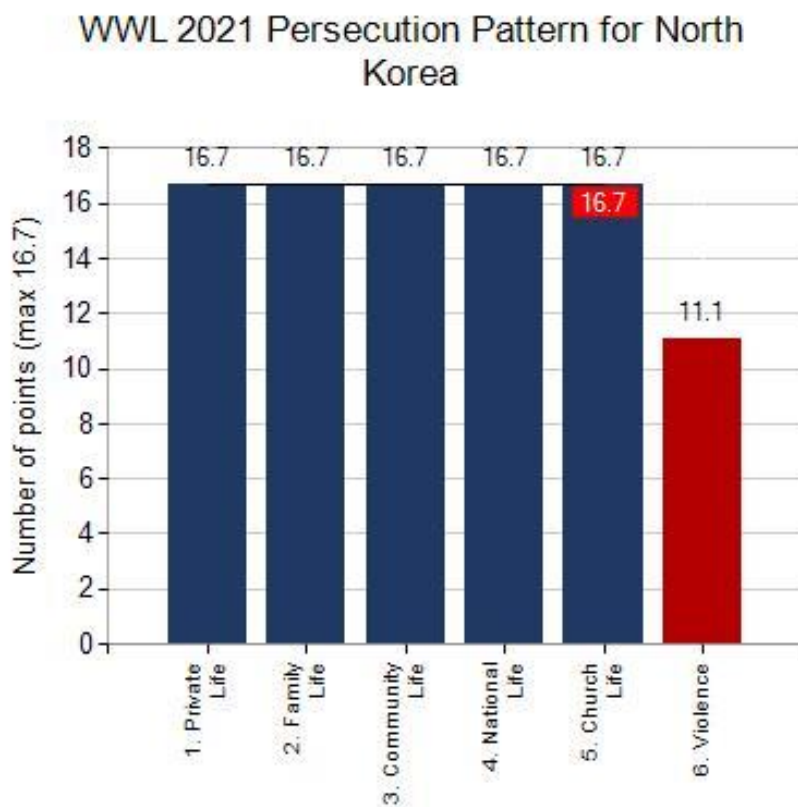
The Christians in this category originate from the time before the Korean War (1950 -1953). While many Christians either died in the war or fled to the South, others stayed and they and their descendants (now in the third or fourth generation) make up these communities. Every citizen is classified into 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 2021 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.
- The violence score remained at a very high level, reaching 11.1 points in WWL 2021 (as in WWL 2020). 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.

## 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 2021 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: <http://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. 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, imprisoned in 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. From time to time, there are even reports that trade marks resembling a cross or a plus sign are 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. 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.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

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

Baptism is the clearest and most visible proof of Christian faith. It is impossible to conduct baptisms openly in North Korea. If a baptism is exposed, the people who were 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 done.

### **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. Despite these limitations, Christians try 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 courses up to tertiary education 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. 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 being a Christian is revealed.

## 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 under the strongest surveillance in prison camps or remote mountain areas. 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'. Everyone is under strict social control as North Korea applies the Communist neighborhood watch system called *inminban*, whose local leaders have been given more authority since 2018 (Daily NK, 25 May 2018). 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. The weekly self-criticism and study sessions can 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. 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 main focus are "revolutionary acts", however, as one of the purposes of the interrogation is to discover "Christian spies", seen as a prime example of a revolutionary act, Christians are very vulnerable to exposure. Moreover, people monitor their neighbors and report to the authorities when they find something suspicious.

## 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.”

Although in the WWL 2021 reporting period the focus of reverence shifted more to Kim Jong Un, this does not change the fact that the guarantee of freedom of religion and belief in the North Korean Constitution is 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 evil, spies, terrorists and betrayers of the nation. Missionary activities in DPRK state media are constantly referred to as "acts of terrorism". Christians are likewise portrayed as allies of the USA and South Korea. Not only the mass media but also government-published textbooks describe Christians in such a negative manner.

### **Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (4.00 points)**

Displaying Christian symbols or Christian materials, even at home, is a very dangerous act in North Korea. If discovered, the owner will face arrest, imprisonment and/or execution. Displaying a Christian symbol in public could be considered an attempt at overthrowing the state and thus receive the severest punishment. Even the official churches in Pyongyang do not display crosses.

### **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 occasionally are trials, no equal or fair treatment will take place, as the courts are in place to uphold and "justify" the Party's - or more precisely, the leader's - will. Even foreign Christians who have faced court proceedings have been deprived of equal treatment and been held in prolonged arbitrary detention.

## 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. There have been many cases in North Korea where underground church groups were discovered and Christians 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)**

Of course there are no official pastors in North Korea. However, the regime is especially interested in targeting and exposing the leaders of the underground church groups. 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, as could be witnessed in the WWL 2021 reporting period.

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

Foreign tourists are kept under control to make sure they bring only one Bible for personal use and cannot leave it 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 North Korea.

### **Block 5.19: Churches have been hindered in their interaction with the global church (both foreigners visiting and nationals being able to visit Christians in other countries to attend conferences etc.). (4.00 points)**

North Koreans are not allowed to leave the country without government permission and getting this permission is very difficult for ordinary citizens. To qualify for permission there are strict checks on the purpose, family background, personal Songbun etc., which means Christians cannot even dream of meeting with other Christians abroad or of attending conferences. Foreign Christians travelling to North Korea cannot meet with Christians either, as tourists are under strict surveillance. Reports stating that South Korean church leaders [met with their North Korean counterparts](#) show that not all details coming out of North Korea can be trusted; the Korean Christian Fellowship is under strict state scrutiny (Ecumenical News, 23 June 2018). The official North Korean church – if it exists at all - can hardly be seen as being representative of Christian witness in the country; many observers view such delegations as pure sham.

Reports that the Orthodox patriarch of Moscow is [planning to visit](#) North Korea and the Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Pyongyang are also to be treated with caution: When the visit eventually takes place, it will be carefully orchestrated and any meetings with Orthodox or other Christians - if any - will be arranged by the regime (Asia News, 5 March 2019). At the time of writing, more than 18 months later, the announced visit has not yet taken place.

## Violence

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 end of 2011.

## 5 Year trends

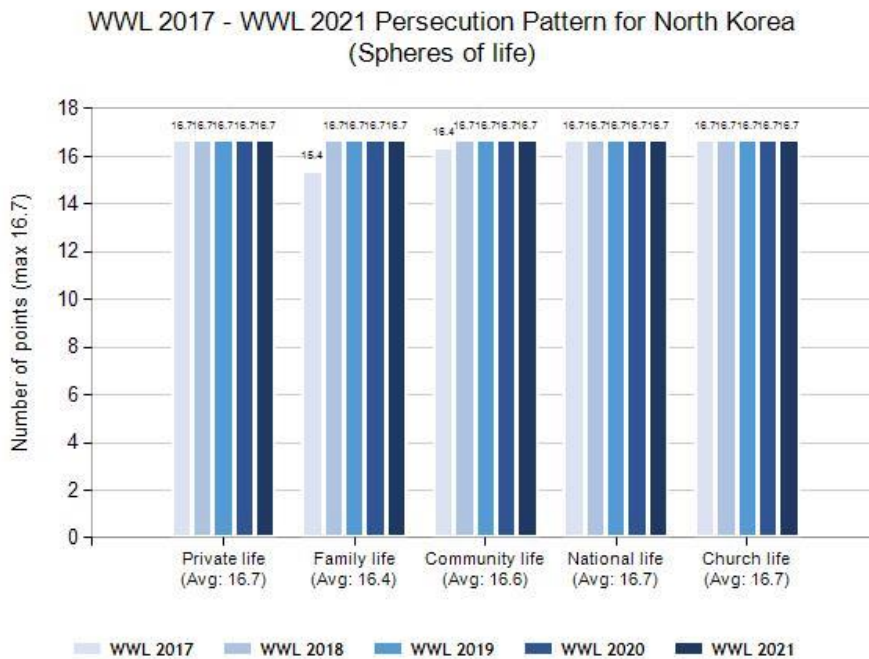
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

North Korea: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	16.7
2020	16.7
2019	16.7
2018	16.7
2017	16.4

In the chart above it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians has risen to the maximum level in the last three 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 and persecution is 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 that the violence score has been slowly increasing since WWL 2017, reaching its highest level in the WWL 2020 and WWL 2021 reporting periods with raids and killings of Christians taking place.



## Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Denied custody of children
Forced divorce
Forced to flee town/country
Imprisonment by government
Trafficking
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual

Many North Korean women who have defected to China have been subject to human trafficking. It is estimated that up to 80% of all defectors are women. Given the recent improvement of the North Korea-China relationship, cooperation between the North Korean intelligent agency and Chinese police has been strengthened. As a result, the numbers of repatriated North Korean women from China before the COVID-19 crisis is growing, and often the targets are women who have had contact with Christians and have tried to escape China to South Korea. Defectors suffer from the fear of forced repatriation and severe interrogations, including torture. Others may face a continuous cycle of violence and harassment from the Chinese who purchased them, and repeated trafficking.

Open Doors estimates that tens of thousands of DPRK Christians are in labor camps for their faith, where female criminals and prisoners suffer from sexual violence during the interrogation process and prison life. Sources indicate that rape is a daily occurrence inside the DPRK concentration camps. A UN [report](#) on the human rights violations against women in the DPRK highlights that rape and other sexual violence and torture in detention facilities of women is endemic, and guards are known to sexually abuse or exploit female prisoners (United Nations 2020 report, "Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea"). This sexual exploitation is enabled by a society which is culturally patriarchal; women are treated relatively poorly and are considered subservient to men. In the law on the protection of women and family law, the focus is on reconciliation rather than the prosecution of perpetrators of gender-based violence against women; it does not provide for victim protection and support measures or for criminal liability of perpetrators, creating a means of legal impunity for the use of domestic and sexual violence as a means of religious persecution.

Those from historically Christian families may be forcibly divorced from their husbands and denied custody of their children. Further, since 2014, it has become mandatory for females to go 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).

In the harsh life of North Korea, where [28%](#) of pregnant and lactating women are estimated to be undernourished, women are gaining increasing power in their household economy through their work in the town markets and are free from government-assigned work positions, unlike men (The Independent, 20th November 2017).

## Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Discrimination/harassment via education
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Imprisonment by government
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Violence – physical

The patriarchal society of North Korea means that State monitoring and control over the population is especially focused on the male heads of the household. All male adults must belong to workplaces allocated by the government. They have to confirm their attendance at work and cannot stop working for any private reason. This is because the job allocation is a government system of controlling people. The increasingly shaky national ration distribution is also based on male head of household. Because of this system, the main actors at marketplaces are mostly women.

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's IRF 2019 report](#):

- While shamanism has always been practiced to some degree in the country, NGOs noted an apparent continued increase in shamanistic practices, including in Pyongyang. One source told Radio Free Asia (RFA) it was common for persons to consult fortune tellers before planning weddings, making business deals, or considering other important decisions. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of shamanism. RFA reported a source said that in March in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province, authorities found three women guilty of fortune telling in a public trial. Two of the women were publicly executed by shooting, and the third was sentenced to life in prison. According to the source, the women had created a group called Chilsungyo (Seven Star Group) and said two children in the group were possessed by an oracle spirit. The women received money for telling fortunes. The source said thousands of persons from factories, colleges, and housing units were forced to attend the trial and executions, which were aimed at forcing officials to stop patronizing fortune tellers and engaging in other "superstitious" behavior.
- According to RFA, authorities launched crackdowns on Falun Gong practitioners during the year. Sources said the practice of Falun Gong entered the country through trade workers and spread rapidly, even among high-ranking government officials and their families. In April police issued a proclamation that ordered citizens to report their status as Falun Gong practitioners, the government's first ever such action. According to RFA, the proclamation threatened harsh punishments for those refusing to turn themselves in. Following issuance of the proclamation, police arrested 100 persons in Pyongyang's Songyo District for Falun Gong practices. According to sources, the crackdowns and negative publicity only increased Falun Gong's popularity.

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, in the hope of advancing their career and because of the highly uncertain times.

The reports about violations of the rights of the [Falun Gong](#) movement in North Korea (Radio Free Asia, 17 May 2019) 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. Kim Jong Un strengthened his rule after managing to get what none of his ancestors 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.

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, in his speech 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. The packaging of communication may change but the style of governing remains the same – as does the situation for the general public; no improvement in their lives or a guarantee of rights, including freedom of religion and belief, can be expected. Therefore, one observer rightfully labelled the leader's tears as '[crocodile tears](#)' (Radio Free Asia, 12 October 2020).

Additionally, North Korea sees its human rights situation as an internal matter and may even choose to use this issue as a potential [spoiler for talks](#), should these not proceed according to Pyongyang's wishes (HRNK, 23 April 2018). Significant improvements in the situation of the country's Christians are not to be expected, as they will be continually watched as enemies of the state and the people.

## 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 one - [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/KHS12\\_FINALFINAL.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/KHS12_FINALFINAL.pdf)
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: expanded - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/how-has-kim-jong-un-changed-prison-camps/>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: returning - <http://https://apnews.com/d04acf4a138545b692ebd530d832c218/Missionaries-at-border-spread-Christianity-to-North-Korea>
- Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere: inminban - <http://english.dailynk.com/english/read.php>

- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: 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>
- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: planning to visit - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Patriarch-Kirill-will-visit-North-Korea.-Russian-orthodoxy-in-the-East-46412.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: rape and other sexual violence - <https://kr.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/75/2017-Human-Rights-Report-DPRK.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 28% - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/north-korea-latest-women-rape-sexual-violence-malnutrition-discrimination-un-human-rights-kim-jong-un-a8065291.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Falun Gong - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-falun-gong-05172019164536.html>
- Future outlook: crocodile tears - [https://www.rfa.org/korean/in\\_focus/nk\\_nuclear\\_talks/missilenk-10122020152337.html](https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks/missilenk-10122020152337.html)
- Future outlook: spoiler for talks - <http://www.hrnkinsider.org/2018/04/kim-jong-un-and-xi-jinping-as-close-as.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:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=North Korea>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/North Korea>