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## North Korea: Country Dossier

December 2019



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2020

| Rank | Country                  | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2020 | Total Score WWL 2019 | Total Score WWL 2018 | Total Score WWL 2017 | Total Score WWL 2016 |
|------|--------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1    | North Korea              | 16.7         | 16.7        | 16.7           | 16.7          | 16.7        | 11.1     | 94                   | 94                   | 94                   | 92                   | 92                   |
| 2    | Afghanistan              | 16.7         | 16.7        | 16.7           | 16.7          | 16.7        | 10.0     | 93                   | 94                   | 93                   | 89                   | 88                   |
| 3    | Somalia                  | 16.5         | 16.7        | 16.6           | 16.6          | 16.5        | 9.4      | 92                   | 91                   | 91                   | 91                   | 87                   |
| 4    | Libya                    | 15.3         | 15.5        | 15.8           | 16.0          | 16.4        | 11.3     | 90                   | 87                   | 86                   | 78                   | 79                   |
| 5    | Pakistan                 | 14.0         | 13.9        | 15.0           | 14.9          | 13.7        | 16.7     | 88                   | 87                   | 86                   | 88                   | 87                   |
| 6    | Eritrea                  | 14.5         | 14.9        | 15.9           | 15.9          | 15.4        | 10.9     | 87                   | 86                   | 86                   | 82                   | 89                   |
| 7    | Sudan                    | 14.2         | 14.6        | 14.5           | 15.7          | 16.1        | 10.4     | 85                   | 87                   | 87                   | 87                   | 84                   |
| 8    | Yemen                    | 16.6         | 16.4        | 16.4           | 16.7          | 16.7        | 2.6      | 85                   | 86                   | 85                   | 85                   | 78                   |
| 9    | Iran                     | 14.1         | 14.3        | 14.1           | 15.8          | 16.5        | 10.4     | 85                   | 85                   | 85                   | 85                   | 83                   |
| 10   | India                    | 12.9         | 13.0        | 13.5           | 15.0          | 13.5        | 14.8     | 83                   | 83                   | 81                   | 73                   | 68                   |
| 11   | Syria                    | 13.5         | 14.2        | 13.0           | 13.9          | 14.4        | 12.6     | 82                   | 82                   | 76                   | 86                   | 87                   |
| 12   | Nigeria                  | 12.2         | 11.9        | 13.5           | 12.8          | 13.0        | 16.7     | 80                   | 80                   | 77                   | 78                   | 78                   |
| 13   | Saudi Arabia             | 15.1         | 14.9        | 14.1           | 15.5          | 16.5        | 2.4      | 79                   | 77                   | 79                   | 76                   | 76                   |
| 14   | Maldives                 | 15.4         | 15.6        | 14.0           | 15.9          | 16.6        | 0.7      | 78                   | 78                   | 78                   | 76                   | 76                   |
| 15   | Iraq                     | 14.0         | 14.6        | 13.9           | 14.5          | 13.6        | 5.6      | 76                   | 79                   | 86                   | 86                   | 90                   |
| 16   | Egypt                    | 12.1         | 13.1        | 10.7           | 13.2          | 10.5        | 16.1     | 76                   | 76                   | 70                   | 65                   | 64                   |
| 17   | Algeria                  | 13.5         | 14.3        | 10.4           | 12.8          | 13.2        | 9.3      | 73                   | 70                   | 58                   | 58                   | 56                   |
| 18   | Uzbekistan               | 15.1         | 12.9        | 14.1           | 12.2          | 15.7        | 3.0      | 73                   | 74                   | 73                   | 71                   | 70                   |
| 19   | Myanmar                  | 11.8         | 11.9        | 13.5           | 12.5          | 12.2        | 10.7     | 73                   | 71                   | 65                   | 62                   | 62                   |
| 20   | Laos                     | 12.8         | 9.9         | 14.1           | 14.4          | 14.9        | 5.6      | 72                   | 71                   | 67                   | 64                   | 58                   |
| 21   | Vietnam                  | 12.3         | 8.5         | 12.9           | 13.6          | 14.5        | 9.8      | 72                   | 70                   | 69                   | 71                   | 66                   |
| 22   | Turkmenistan             | 14.5         | 11.2        | 13.8           | 13.3          | 15.7        | 1.9      | 70                   | 69                   | 68                   | 67                   | 66                   |
| 23   | China                    | 11.6         | 8.4         | 11.6           | 12.8          | 15.1        | 10.2     | 70                   | 65                   | 57                   | 57                   | 57                   |
| 24   | Mauritania               | 13.9         | 14.0        | 13.0           | 13.7          | 13.4        | 0.2      | 68                   | 67                   | 57                   | 55                   | 50                   |
| 25   | Central African Republic | 10.1         | 9.1         | 13.1           | 9.8           | 10.2        | 15.6     | 68                   | 70                   | 61                   | 58                   | 59                   |
| 26   | Morocco                  | 12.4         | 13.3        | 10.8           | 11.7          | 14.1        | 4.1      | 66                   | 63                   | 51                   | 49                   | 47                   |
| 27   | Qatar                    | 13.6         | 13.4        | 10.8           | 12.2          | 14.1        | 2.2      | 66                   | 62                   | 63                   | 66                   | 65                   |
| 28   | Burkina Faso             | 9.4          | 9.7         | 10.2           | 9.4           | 11.8        | 15.6     | 66                   | 48                   | -                    | -                    | -                    |
| 29   | Mali                     | 9.2          | 8.2         | 12.8           | 10.0          | 11.7        | 13.7     | 66                   | 68                   | 59                   | 59                   | 55                   |
| 30   | Sri Lanka                | 11.5         | 9.0         | 11.0           | 10.9          | 9.6         | 13.1     | 65                   | 58                   | 57                   | 55                   | 53                   |
| 31   | Tajikistan               | 13.9         | 12.3        | 11.9           | 12.4          | 13.1        | 1.1      | 65                   | 65                   | 65                   | 58                   | 58                   |
| 32   | Nepal                    | 12.4         | 10.8        | 9.9            | 12.1          | 12.2        | 7.0      | 64                   | 64                   | 64                   | 53                   | 53                   |
| 33   | Jordan                   | 13.1         | 14.1        | 10.7           | 11.7          | 12.5        | 1.7      | 64                   | 65                   | 66                   | 63                   | 59                   |

|    |                                  |      |      |      |      |      |      |    |    |    |    |    |
|----|----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|----|----|----|----|----|
| 34 | Tunisia                          | 12.0 | 12.8 | 10.3 | 10.8 | 12.3 | 5.4  | 64 | 63 | 62 | 61 | 58 |
| 35 | Kazakhstan                       | 13.2 | 11.5 | 10.7 | 12.4 | 14.0 | 1.7  | 64 | 63 | 63 | 56 | 55 |
| 36 | Turkey                           | 12.6 | 11.8 | 10.7 | 13.3 | 11.3 | 3.7  | 63 | 66 | 62 | 57 | 55 |
| 37 | Brunei                           | 13.8 | 14.3 | 10.7 | 10.3 | 13.5 | 0.6  | 63 | 63 | 64 | 64 | 61 |
| 38 | Bangladesh                       | 11.1 | 9.9  | 12.7 | 11.1 | 8.9  | 9.3  | 63 | 58 | 58 | 63 | 57 |
| 39 | Ethiopia                         | 10.0 | 9.2  | 10.6 | 10.8 | 10.4 | 11.9 | 63 | 65 | 62 | 64 | 67 |
| 40 | Malaysia                         | 12.1 | 14.6 | 12.7 | 12.0 | 9.6  | 1.5  | 62 | 60 | 65 | 60 | 58 |
| 41 | Colombia                         | 8.9  | 7.8  | 11.9 | 9.8  | 8.9  | 15.0 | 62 | 58 | 56 | 53 | 55 |
| 42 | Oman                             | 12.7 | 13.1 | 10.0 | 11.5 | 12.7 | 2.0  | 62 | 59 | 57 | 53 | 53 |
| 43 | Kuwait                           | 13.2 | 13.1 | 9.9  | 11.5 | 13.4 | 0.7  | 62 | 60 | 61 | 57 | 56 |
| 44 | Kenya                            | 11.7 | 10.5 | 10.9 | 8.3  | 10.9 | 9.1  | 61 | 61 | 62 | 68 | 68 |
| 45 | Bhutan                           | 12.8 | 10.9 | 11.8 | 11.6 | 13.9 | 0.0  | 61 | 64 | 62 | 61 | 56 |
| 46 | Russian Federation               | 12.2 | 8.3  | 10.7 | 10.4 | 12.1 | 6.9  | 60 | 60 | 51 | 46 | 48 |
| 47 | United Arab Emirates             | 12.9 | 13.0 | 9.5  | 11.1 | 12.6 | 1.1  | 60 | 58 | 58 | 55 | 55 |
| 48 | Cameroon                         | 8.8  | 7.2  | 11.6 | 7.0  | 10.4 | 15.0 | 60 | 54 | 38 | -  | 45 |
| 49 | Indonesia                        | 10.9 | 11.1 | 11.6 | 10.2 | 9.5  | 6.5  | 60 | 65 | 59 | 55 | 55 |
| 50 | Niger                            | 9.4  | 9.5  | 13.3 | 7.2  | 11.1 | 9.3  | 60 | 52 | 45 | 47 | 53 |
| 51 | Palestinian Territories          | 12.2 | 13.0 | 9.2  | 10.2 | 11.9 | 3.1  | 60 | 57 | 60 | 64 | 62 |
| 52 | Mexico                           | 8.4  | 6.8  | 12.2 | 10.6 | 10.0 | 11.5 | 60 | 61 | 59 | 57 | 56 |
| 53 | Azerbaijan                       | 13.0 | 10.0 | 9.3  | 11.1 | 12.4 | 1.5  | 57 | 57 | 57 | 52 | 57 |
| 54 | Comoros                          | 11.7 | 11.5 | 9.1  | 9.9  | 13.9 | 0.9  | 57 | 56 | 56 | 56 | 56 |
| 55 | Kyrgyzstan                       | 12.9 | 10.3 | 11.1 | 9.4  | 11.9 | 1.1  | 57 | 56 | 54 | 48 | 46 |
| 56 | Djibouti                         | 12.3 | 12.3 | 10.3 | 10.0 | 11.2 | 0.2  | 56 | 56 | 56 | 57 | 58 |
| 57 | Democratic Republic of the Congo | 5.6  | 6.7  | 10.6 | 7.4  | 10.4 | 15.6 | 56 | 55 | 33 | -  | 53 |
| 58 | Chad                             | 11.5 | 8.2  | 10.2 | 9.6  | 10.3 | 5.9  | 56 | 48 | 40 | -  | 51 |
| 59 | Bahrain                          | 12.1 | 12.3 | 9.1  | 10.1 | 10.5 | 0.9  | 55 | 55 | 57 | 54 | 54 |
| 60 | Tanzania                         | 9.3  | 10.8 | 10.3 | 8.6  | 8.7  | 7.0  | 55 | 52 | 53 | 59 | 57 |
| 61 | Cuba                             | 9.6  | 5.6  | 9.5  | 11.8 | 12.0 | 3.5  | 52 | 49 | 49 | 47 | 42 |
| 62 | Uganda                           | 8.1  | 4.6  | 6.7  | 6.7  | 9.1  | 13.0 | 48 | 47 | 46 | 53 | 45 |
| 63 | Burundi                          | 5.1  | 5.8  | 9.7  | 9.2  | 9.6  | 8.7  | 48 | 43 | -  | -  | -  |
| 64 | Guinea                           | 10.3 | 7.5  | 8.3  | 7.0  | 8.1  | 3.7  | 45 | 46 | -  | -  | -  |
| 65 | South Sudan                      | 5.7  | 1.5  | 7.0  | 6.3  | 7.8  | 15.6 | 44 | 44 | -  | -  | -  |
| 66 | Mozambique                       | 6.9  | 4.6  | 7.1  | 5.2  | 8.0  | 11.7 | 43 | 43 | -  | -  | -  |
| 67 | Gambia                           | 8.3  | 8.2  | 8.7  | 8.3  | 8.8  | 1.1  | 43 | 43 | -  | -  | -  |
| 68 | Angola                           | 6.4  | 3.6  | 7.0  | 8.7  | 10.4 | 6.7  | 43 | 42 | -  | -  | -  |
| 69 | Venezuela                        | 3.8  | 4.4  | 10.6 | 9.3  | 9.5  | 4.8  | 42 | 41 | 34 | -  | -  |
| 70 | Ivory Coast                      | 9.8  | 8.6  | 8.2  | 5.5  | 6.6  | 3.5  | 42 | 43 | -  | -  | -  |
| 71 | Rwanda                           | 5.3  | 4.4  | 6.7  | 7.8  | 10.1 | 7.2  | 42 | 41 | -  | -  | -  |

|    |           |     |     |     |     |     |     |    |    |   |   |   |
|----|-----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|---|---|---|
| 72 | Nicaragua | 5.8 | 4.2 | 8.5 | 9.8 | 9.0 | 4.1 | 41 | 41 | - | - | - |
| 73 | Togo      | 8.6 | 6.7 | 8.5 | 7.1 | 8.4 | 1.1 | 41 | 42 | - | - | - |

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## Brief note on 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 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

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).

# WWL 2020: Persecution summary / North Korea

## Brief country details

The number of Christians listed in the table below is an Open Doors (OD) estimate:

| Pop 2019    | Christians | Chr%        |
|-------------|------------|-------------|
| North Korea |            |             |
| 25,727,000  | 300,000    | OD estimate |

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

Estimates of the number of Christians vary from around 30,000 to “several hundred thousand”. Naturally, it is difficult to verify any figures due to the highly restrictive environment. Based on information from inside the country, Open Doors estimates a range between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians. Whatever statistics are used, all accounts show that the number of Christians is slowly but steadily growing.

| World Watch List North Korea | Points | WWL Rank |
|------------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2020                     | 94     | 1        |
| WWL 2019                     | 94     | 1        |
| WWL 2018                     | 94     | 1        |
| WWL 2017                     | 92     | 1        |
| WWL 2016                     | 92     | 1        |

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 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 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.

## Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

There have been raids against Christians and killings, but no details can be published for security reasons. Pastor Dong-cheol Kim (arrested in 2015) and two Korean-American Christian lecturers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), Tony Kim and Hak-song Kim (arrested in April and May 2017 respectively) were all accused of espionage but released ahead of the US-North Korean summit in June 2018. In a [change of hiring policy](#), PUST is now reportedly looking for non-US staff, a logical consequence of USA's travel ban. There have been more reports coming from North Korea, but for security reasons, no details can be given.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution summary / North Korea

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: change of hiring policy - <https://www.nknews.org/2017/10/pyongyang-university-no-longer-seeking-american-volunteers/?c=1508909752924>

# WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / North Korea

## Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929>.

## 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. 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 and 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.

## Political and legal landscape

Kim Jong Un has been demonstrating a different style of leadership from his father. 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.

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. After the short meeting, it was announced that working-level talks would resume, an announcement which does not seem to have led to any concrete action yet. 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.

The [assassination](#) of Kim Jong Un's half-brother Kim Jong Nam in public at Kuala Lumpur airport in February 2017 shows the recklessness of the regime when it perceives itself as being under threat. US American student Otto Warmbier's [death](#) (after a surprise release following 14 months in a labor camp) highlighted the dire situation of the country's camp system. In June 2019, the surprising detention of one of the few foreign students in Pyongyang, Australian citizen Alek Sigley, on [spying](#) allegations, showed that North Korea can and does act just as it wants, finding pretexts wherever necessary.

## Religious landscape

No reliable data showing a statistical, religious break-down is available.

Religion in North Korea basically means the personality cult related to the leaders' family. Everyone has to attend weekly information meetings and self-criticism sessions and memorize more than 100 pages of ideological learning materials, including documents, poems and songs which all praise the morals and majesty of the Kims. Even pre-school children become indoctrinated at an early stage. Approximately, 100,000 Juche "research centers" – mostly comprising of one room – reportedly exist throughout the country.

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 and adherents are able to live their faith without anyone noticing. Christianity, on the other hand, is seen as a dangerous foreign religion which has to be viciously fought against. Therefore, Christians have no room in North Korea and must consequently live their lives in utmost secrecy. When it is reported that South Korean church leaders [met with their North Korean counterparts](#), such news should not be taken at face value. 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; indeed 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 to date no report about this visit has been given. It can, however, be seen as an effort to strengthen ties with Russia and diversify diplomatic options.

## Economic landscape

No reliable economic data is available.

The country needs international aid, but the regime restricts direct access to the 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. People are getting increasingly used to this sort of trading, as it helps them to survive; in theory this runs counter to the country's teachings but it is acknowledged as being badly needed and occurs country-wide with the help of bribes.

One other important means of earning hard currency is for the government to send migrant workers to other countries, even to [Europe](#). But this has its challenges for the regime as well. This was well illustrated by a group defection of 13 North Korean waitresses working in North Korean [restaurants](#) in an unnamed third country in April 2016. International sanctions are increasingly preventing this way of earning currency. The importance of such economic issues could be seen in the annual budget report to parliament in April 2019, where it was clear that the country's leadership was placing special focus on the [economy](#). It also seems that the tightly guarded Chinese-North Korean [border](#) is becoming more penetrable again, not for defections but for goods.

The brief closure of the [Kaesong](#) liaison office in March 2019 showed how North Korea can angrily flex its muscles when it wants to and not pursue economic development at all costs. (North Korean officials [reported back for work](#) just days later, after it became known that US President Trump had decided not to implement new and harsher sanctions.) The closure showed how Kim Jong Un wishes to be seen as remaining firmly in command and that he is ultimately not interested in serving citizens by allowing more freedom or improving standards of living. Improvements for ordinary North Koreans - and especially for the Christian minority - remain a very long way off.

## Social and cultural landscape

Influenced by Confucianism – a Chinese ethical and philosophical system going back to the 6th century BC – North Korea developed a social classification system 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. Although this system remains in operation, reports from North Korea show that [bribes can make a difference](#) and cause officials to look the other way. However, this is not an option for Christians, whose opportunities for earning money are limited.

North Korea faces a high potential for natural disasters since 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 is [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 May 2019, the United Nations' World Food Program again alerted the world to the situation in North Korea, stating that [10.1 million people](#) are suffering from severe food insecurity. As a BBC report pointed out, the current situation may have been aggravated by the international sanctions imposed as a result of the country's missile and nuclear program. Although the lack of spare parts for harvesting machines points to this possibility, [natural causes](#) (such as lack of rain, prolonged heatwaves and sudden flooding) have contributed as well. When Kim Jong Un [went to Russia](#) and met with President Putin in April 2019, he reportedly asked for the delivery of 10,000 tons of flour, which might indicate that the food situation is more serious than previously assumed.

## Technological landscape

Reliable data is again hard to come by when considering the technological context. According to the [World Bank Country Profile](#) for North Korea (which has many gaps as well), an estimated 14.9 out of every 100 people held cell phone subscriptions in 2017. 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 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. Freedom House does not rate North Korea in its "Freedom on the Net 2019" report.

## Security situation

Technically, North Korea is still at war with the United States of America, as at the end of the Korean War in 1953, only a ceasefire deal was reached. 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 strictly implemented. Talks focussing on denuclearization are complex, however. 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.

Defections remain at a [stable level](#); the number of North Koreans successfully reaching South Korea in 2018 was 1137, an increase of only 10 escapees compared to 2017. 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 of human traffickers, be it for work or for marriage purposes. China has continued to keep its border with North Korea tightly closed and monitored. 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](#).

## Trends analysis

### 1) Survival of the regime 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. Also, the Warmbier case showed to a shocked world how dire the situation in North Korea's labor camps must be – publicity which the country usually tries to avoid at all costs. The Sigley incident showed that even people blending in with society can be arrested for trumped-up charges. Challenges like the [raid of the North Korean embassy](#) in Spain in February 2019 also occur and may serve the regime as reasons to lash out against perceived adversaries.

## 2) Diplomatic skills re-discovered?

The series of diplomatic surprises continued in 2019, but also hit a bump in the road when the meetings in Hanoi and Vladivostok ended without a common declaration. Many observers aired overly optimistic expectations, as if the first meeting with a sitting US President or his stepping into North Korean territory would somehow change everything overnight. In reality, it will probably take years for the negotiations to be translated into tangible political results for both sides. Whereas for South Korea and the international community de-nuclearization is among the top priorities, Pyongyang is more interested in sanctions being lifted quickly and in developing the country according to its own terms and conditions. This involves a plethora of details which - if discussions do indeed continue - will be discussed far away from the limelight of international attention. Meanwhile, more bumps, testing of waters and roadblocks can be expected. It is possible that some sort of [quick agreement](#) might be found, since this would suit both Kim Jong Un and the US president for domestic purposes. However, this seems increasingly unlikely, especially since North Korea has announced on numerous occasions that the window for negotiations will close at the end of 2019. If any potential agreement was reached, it would have no effect on the situation for Christians in the country; they will remain in hiding, trying to survive, just as they have done over the last decades.

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

The killing of Kim Jong Nam at a Malaysian airport and the recent warm ties with its traditional ally, China, testify to an increased self-confidence. At the same time, the country's biggest challenge remains its relationship with China. It still depends heavily on China economically and therefore needs close ties with the only country it shares a significant border with (excepting South Korea). China may be unhappy with the regime's behavior but still has 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. China's reasons are: i) The unpredictability of any scenario if the Kim regime did collapse; ii) the question whether North Korea's nuclear weapons could be a potential danger for China itself and for the stability of the whole region; 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.

Kim Jong Un has started to take the country's friendship with China more seriously, but he is also looking for alternatives, hence his visit to Russia in April 2019. In June 2019, President Xi Jinping finally visited Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang and was received with all honors. However, this visit may have had more to do with the escalating US-China trade war, the visit being intended as a [warning](#) to the USA. Additionally, the new South Korean government - with its strong interest in forging closer ties with North Korea - may also make it much more difficult for the [US government](#) to implement tough international sanctions.

There are many signs indicating an even more severe persecution of Christians in North Korea in the future:

- The increased detention and abduction of (South Korean and Chinese Korean) Christians and missionaries in China.

- The strengthened border control and harsher punishment of North Korean citizens who are repatriated from China.
- The increased number of South Korean missionaries being expelled by [China](#).
- The increased activities of the North Korean government in its attempts to eliminate all channels for spreading the Christian faith.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / North Korea

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929>
- 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: meeting - <https://www.nknews.org/2019/06/north-korean-leader-meets-u-s-south-korean-presidents-at-panmunjom/>
- Political and legal landscape: assassination - <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/15/exclusive-two-female-secret-agents-behind-murder-kim-jong-unsbrother/>
- Political and legal landscape: death - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/anger-tears-otto-completes-journey-home/>
- Political and legal landscape: spying - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48893523>
- Religious landscape: 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: 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: Europe - <https://news.vice.com/article/cash-for-kim-how-north-koreans-are-working-themselves-to-death-in-europe>
- Economic landscape: restaurants - <https://www.nknews.org/2016/04/13-n-korean-restaurant-workers-defect-to-s-korea-mou/>
- Economic landscape: economy - <https://www.38north.org/2019/04/rfrank041319/>
- Economic landscape: border - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/customs-06152018140404.html>
- Economic landscape: Kaesong - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/korean-peninsula/300-case-kaesong-fostering-korean-peace-through-economic-ties>
- Economic landscape: reported back for work - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-office/north-korean-officials-return-to-liaison-office-after-pullout-idUSKCN1R607Q>
- Social and cultural landscape: bribes can make a difference - <https://www.nknews.org/2019/09/ask-a-north-korean-what-is-the-songbun-system-like-under-kim-jong-un/>

- Social and cultural landscape: facing a food crisis - [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-sanctions-un/north-korea-warns-of-food-crisis-slashes-rations-before-next-leaders-summit-idUSKCN1QA2X9?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-sanctions-un/north-korea-warns-of-food-crisis-slashes-rations-before-next-leaders-summit-idUSKCN1QA2X9?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29)
- Social and cultural landscape: 10.1 million people - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-food-un/north-korea-faces-food-crisis-after-poor-harvest-u-n-says-idUSKCN1S90LC>
- Social and cultural landscape: natural causes - [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48150205?intlink\\_from\\_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cywd23g0gz5t/north-korea&link\\_location=live-reporting-story](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48150205?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cywd23g0gz5t/north-korea&link_location=live-reporting-story)
- Social and cultural landscape: went to Russia - <https://www.38north.org/2019/04/sblank042219/>
- Technological landscape: World Bank Country Profile - [https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report\\_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=PRK](https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=PRK)
- Technological landscape: "one of the most restrictive cellular environments in the world" - <https://www.38north.org/2019/07/mwilliams072219/>
- Security situation: stable level - <https://www.nknews.org/2019/01/number-of-north-korean-defections-to-south-rose-in-2018-mou/>
- Security situation: infiltrating - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-state-security-agents-infiltrate-churches-in-china-to-cozy-up-to-south-koreans/>
- Security situation: North Korean refugee networks - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-china-defectors/chinese-raids-hit-north-korean-defectors-underground-railroad-idUSKCN1TH0VJ?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Trends analysis: raid of the North Korean embassy - [https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/04/22/inenglish/1555917763\\_457001.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/04/22/inenglish/1555917763_457001.html)
- Trends analysis: quick agreement - <https://www.nknews.org/2019/07/the-stage-is-set-north-korea-and-the-u-s-appear-finally-willing-to-make-a-deal/>
- Trends analysis: warning - <https://www.38north.org/2019/06/ysun062519/>
- Trends analysis: US government - [https://www.nknews.org/2018/07/after-the-pyongyang-debacle-where-can-u-s-policy-go-from-here/?utm\\_source=drip&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=2018-07-09%20DAILY%20UPDATE](https://www.nknews.org/2018/07/after-the-pyongyang-debacle-where-can-u-s-policy-go-from-here/?utm_source=drip&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2018-07-09%20DAILY%20UPDATE)
- Trends analysis: China - <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2017/march/china-kicks-out-korean-missionaries-south-north-thaad-jilin.html>

## WWL 2020: 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.

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 - WWL 2020: Church information / North Korea

- Christian origins: 8000 Catholics - [https://https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_Korea](https://https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Korea)

# WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

## Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 94 points, North Korea is again at Rank 1 in WWL 2020.

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) has not changed anything for Christians in the country. Police raids aiming to identify and uproot citizens with deviating thoughts - including Christians - have reportedly increased.

## Persecution engines

| Persecution engines: North Korea          | Abbreviation | Level of influence |
|---|--------------|--------------------|
| Islamic oppression                        | IO           | Not at all         |
| Religious nationalism                     | RN           | Not at all         |
| Clan and ethnic antagonism                | CEA          | 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 still is 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 persecution 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. 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.

The WWL 2019 reporting period saw the first signs of a [growing personality cult](#) surrounding Kim Jong Un. The [first official painting](#) of Kim Jong Un was also unveiled in November 2018, when Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Cane visited Pyongyang. The painting shows Kim Jong Un dressed in a dark suit and tie, not in a Communist-style uniform.

Even though his power may not be as absolute as his father's or grandfather's, no one can challenge his authority and Kim Jong Un has consolidated his power, not least by achieving 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 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.

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. 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 power of her own.

## Drivers of persecution

| Drivers of Persecution:<br>North Korea                     | IO | RN | CEA | 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.) and embassies | - | - | - | - | -           | - | -           | - |

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 holds grip on North Korea. Since he decided to change the "Military first" policy, the WPK has gained in importance. Its rules and decisions are implemented and Christians are regarded as enemies in the party's ideology.
- **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, as 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.

## Geographical hotspots of persecution

There are no hotspots in North Korea in the classical meaning of the word. Insurgency is unthinkable and the regime keeps a watchful eye on citizens. For several years, the border region with China might have been called a hotspot, as 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.

## 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 strongest persecution imaginable:

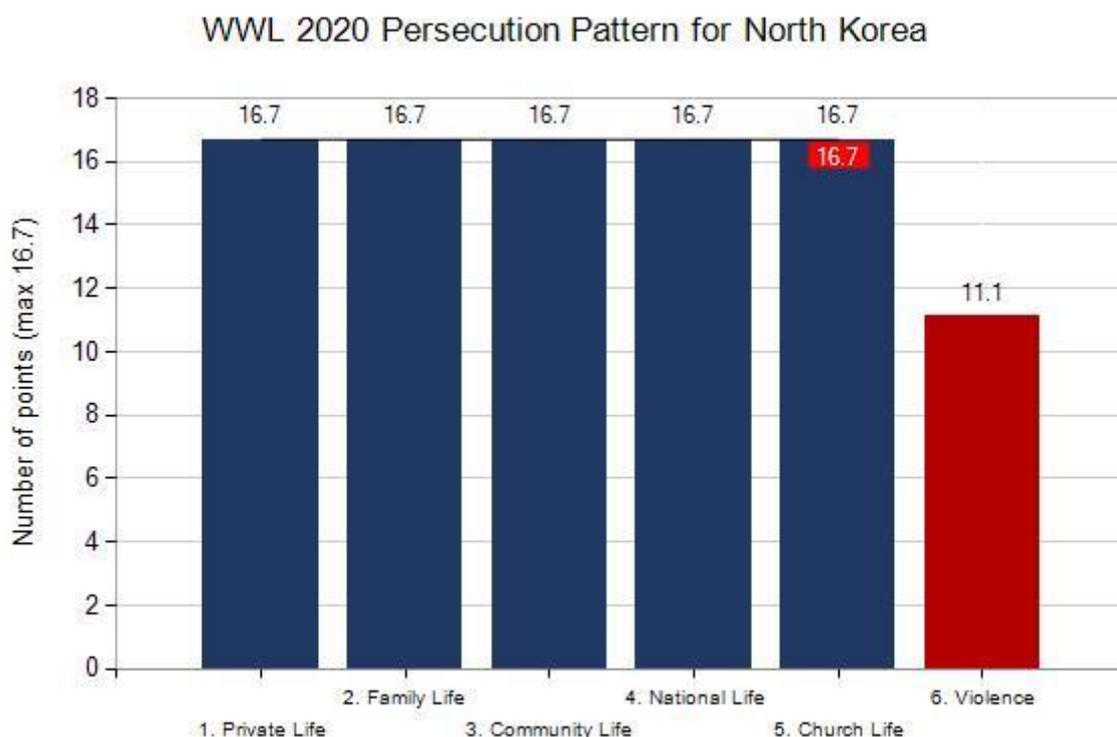
### **Historical Christian communities:**

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 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.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 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 all the regime's diplomatic activities over the reporting period, each *Sphere of life* has retained the maximum possible score of 16.7 points. The meetings in 2018 and 2019 with international heads of state brought no benefit 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.

- The violence score remained at a very high level, reaching 11.1 points in WWL 2020 (10.9 in WWL 2019). If someone is discovered as a Christian, he or she will be arrested, interrogated and brought to a prison camp. Killings have also been reported.

### Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. 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 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

### Private sphere:

- ***It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials (Block 1.3 / Score: 4 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. If they find Christian materials, they and their family can be banished, imprisoned in a prison camp and potentially executed.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 4 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.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian materials in the Internet (Block 1.6 / Score: 4 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.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members (Block 1.7 / Score: 4 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. Family members are no exception. 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.

*Given the situation outlined above, it is no wonder that North Korea scores maximum points in the Private sphere. It is highly dangerous to read the Bible or to express 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.*

### Family sphere:

- ***Christian baptisms have been hindered (Block 2.4 / Score: 4 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.

- **Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs (Block 2.7 / Score: 4 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. Open Christian education is impossible, as the children are indoctrinated by the state, starting from a very young age. Despite these limitations, Christians try to share biblical stories by telling them disguised as fairy tales.
- **Christian children have been pressed to attend anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 4 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. Christians are always described as enemies and missionaries as wicked men, swindlers and spies. Even in the PhD study curriculum for a subject like Nuclear Physics, 30% of the coursework involves the study of Juche ideology.
- **Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce (Block 2.11 / Score 4 points):** Normally, when a Christian is exposed, there are no requests for divorce and 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.

*The maximum score in this Sphere of life is reflected in one commentator's statement: "Children are taught the name of Kim Il Sung before they are taught their parents' names." If Christians are discovered, they will lose everything. They will not only be interrogated to find out about their networks, their families 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 Communion service openly is out of the question.*

#### **Community sphere:**

- **Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (Block 3.2 / Score: 4 points):** All exposed Christians who are not executed are under the strongest surveillance in the prison camps or remote wild mountain areas. 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. 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.

- **Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events (Block 3.5 / Score: 4 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.
- **Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (Block 3.9 / Score: 4 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. Even people who just have Christian ancestors or relatives experience disadvantages and limitations in their education, even if they make it to university level.
- **Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local police for faith-related reasons (Block 3.13 / Score: 4 points):** Random interrogation by police or the secret service is common in North Korea. All North Koreans can be targeted. However, as one of the purposes of the interrogation is to discover "Christian spies", Christians are very vulnerable to exposure. Moreover, people monitor their neighbors and report to the authorities when they find something suspicious.

*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 (which have intensified, according to recent reports, reflecting an increasing pressure from the state and reliance on ideology).*

#### **National sphere:**

- **Constitution or comparable national or state law limit freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 4 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, founded 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."

- **Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians (Block 4.10 / Score 4 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.
- **Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols (Block 4.12 / Score: 4 points):** Displaying Christian symbols or Christian materials, even at home, is a very dangerous act in North Korea. Discovered, they will face arbitrary 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.
- **Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment (Block 4.15 / Score: 4 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.

*Everything is aligned with the ideologies of Juche and "Kimilsungism" (as explained above). Consequently, the National sphere scores maximum points. North Korean police 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 National Unification (quoted by the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2018, page 10): "Citizens continued to receive education from authorities at least twice a year emphasizing ways to detect and identify individuals who engage in spreading Christianity".*

#### **Church sphere:**

- **Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 4 points):** All church activities are illegal in North Korea except for the church services held in the official churches in Pyongyang, which 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 several Christians brought into camps or killed as a result. Details cannot be published for security reasons.
- **Pastors or other Christian leaders, or their family members, have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons (Block 5.11 / Score: 4 points):** 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.

- **Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials (Block 5.13 / Score: 4 points):** Foreign tourists are controlled 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.
- **Churches have been hindered in their interaction with the global church (Block 5.19 / Score: 4 points):** North Koreans are not allowed to leave the country without government permission and getting this permission is very difficult for normal people. 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 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 highly staged and any meetings with Orthodox or other Christians - if any - will be carefully arranged by the regime.

*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: Reports from 2012 point to a [seminary](#) of sorts existing in Pyongyang, but churches are not allowed to train their leaders or ministers freely. Youthwork cannot be carried out at all.*

## Violence

Persecution 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.

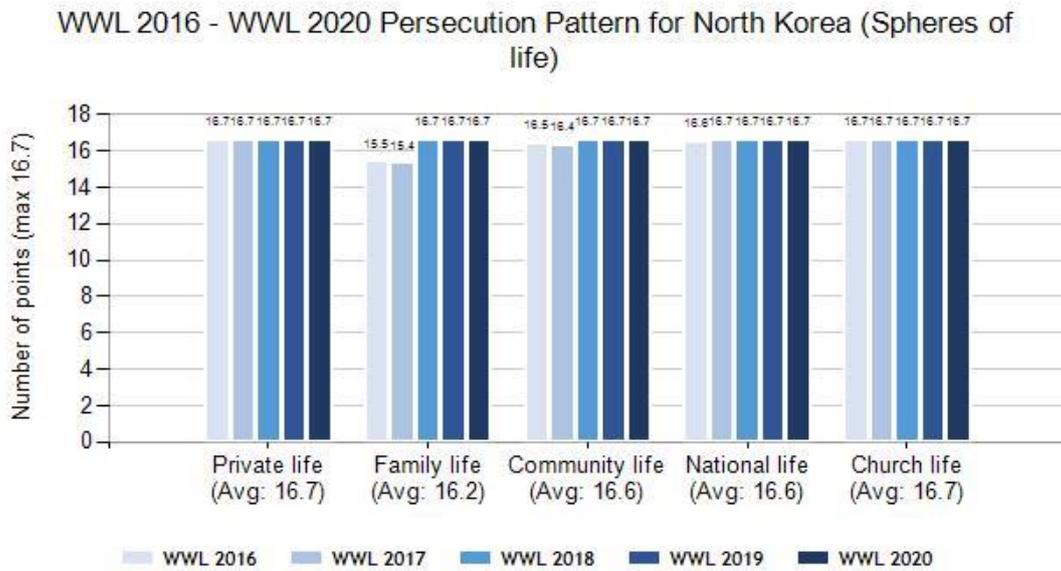
## 5 Year trends

The Persecution pattern for North Korea shows very little variation over the last five reporting periods, even the violence score appears stable.

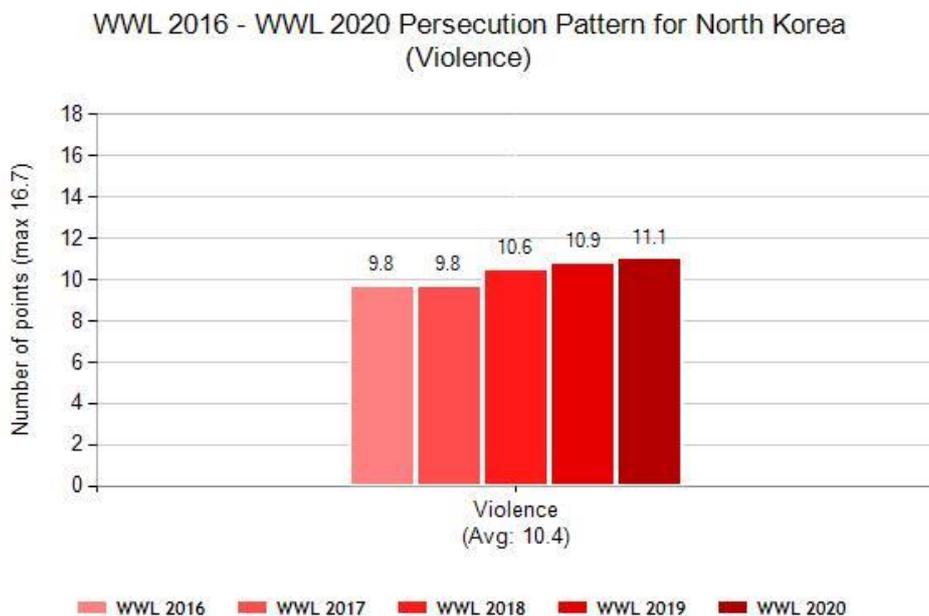
**Chart 1:** In the chart below it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians has risen to the maximum level in the last two reporting periods, showing that Kim Jong Un is proving to be a worthy successor to his father and grand-father as far as persecution is concerned.

| WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history:<br>North Korea | Average pressure over 5 Spheres<br>of life |
|---|--|
| 2020  | 16.7                                       |
| 2019  | 16.7                                       |
| 2018  | 16.7                                       |
| 2017  | 16.4                                       |
| 2016  | 16.4                                       |

**Chart 2:** The chart below shows that extreme and maximum scores have become a fixed pattern in all *spheres of life* over the last 5 reporting periods.



**Chart 3:** The table below shows that the violence score has been slowly increasing since WWL 2017, reaching its highest level in WWL 2020.



## Gender profile of persecution

When Christians are discovered in North Korea, most are imprisoned, interrogated, tortured and many are finally killed. Given this very harsh reality, there is no distinction of treatment between women and men. However, women fleeing across the border to China have often been abused and ended up in forced marriages. Since these women are considered illegal migrants by Chinese authorities, they are repatriated when caught. Women have been defecting more often than men - and have been turning to Christian faith in China more often than men. If they are found to be pregnant, North Korean security personnel frequently force them into abortion by the most violent and abhorrent means, according to reports. This has been the case for both Christian and non-Christian women. However, the steady stream of defectors has decreased over recent years due to stronger security measures on both sides of the border and due to improved food security in North Korea.

Human Rights Watch have published a report entitled "[Sexual Violence Against Women by Officials](#)" in October 2018. Without mentioning any possible religious affiliation, it highlights the pervasive (sexual) abuse of women in North Korean society, also showing that the attitude of regarding women as inferior is deeply rooted in Korean culture.

### Female "Pressure points":

- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Imprisonment by government***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Trafficking***
- ***Violence - sexual***
- ***Violence - verbal.***

Open Doors estimates that up to 30% 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. Both Human Rights Watch and the US State Department report respectively that 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. This sexual exploitation is enabled by a society which is culturally patriarchal; women are treated relatively poorly and are considered subservient to men. Although little information makes its way out of North Korea, a 2018 Human Rights' Watch report documented the extent to which rape and sexual abuse are [normalized](#). 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. 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, but the length is shorter than for males (around 5 years).

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. This, both contributes to the elevation of status of women and opens a new Pressure Point for women whose businesses is lost due to State crackdown.

Additionally, many NK women who have defected to China have been subject to human trafficking. Given the recent improvement of the NK-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 is growing, and often the targets are NK women who have had contact with Christians and have tried to escape China to South Korea. Defectors suffer from the fear of forceful repatriation and related issues - a continuous cycle of violence and harassment from the Chinese who purchased them, and repeated trafficking.

#### **Male "Pressure points":**

- ***Discrimination/harassment via education***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Military/militia conscription/service against conscience***
- ***Violence - Physical***

North Korea's control over the population is mainly centered around 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. National ration distribution is also based on male head of household. Because of this system, the main actors at market places are mostly women. North Korea's patriarchal control system suppresses the freedom of males.

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.

Advancement (good schools, preferred military service, prestigious jobs, party membership) would be disallowed for men with past Christian connection in their family tree.

### **Persecution of other religious minorities**

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 officially banned. However, even members of the Party reportedly indulge in this, e.g. to advance their career.

There have also been reports about the persecution of the [Falun Gong](#) movement in North Korea. 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 for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

- **Communist and post-Communist oppression blended with Dictatorial paranoia:** Persecution 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. Kim Jong Un strengthened his rule in the WWL 2019 and WWL 2020 reporting periods and managed to get what none of his ancestors ever achieved, a meeting with a ruling US president. If and how this relationship between the DPRK and USA develops, remains to be seen. Disappointments are likely as details now need to be negotiated. 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. In any case, significant improvements for the country's Christians are not to be expected. On the contrary: China continues to repatriate every North Korean who manages to defect, despite having signed the United Nation's Refugee Convention and its non-refoulement principle and despite the fact that China could send all defectors to South Korea with minimum cost and effort.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: growing personality cult - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/efforts-ramp-up-to-promote-kim-jong-un-personality-cult/>
- Persecution engines: first official painting - [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46106393?intlink\\_from\\_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cywd23g0gz5t/north-korea&link\\_location=live-reporting-story](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46106393?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cywd23g0gz5t/north-korea&link_location=live-reporting-story)
- Persecution engines: his own accomplishments - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/23/kim-jong-un-introduces-new-mandatory-national-oath-erasing-father/>
- Persecution engines: family business - <https://www.nknews.org/2018/05/what-will-become-of-kim-yo-jong/>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: returning - <http://https://apnews.com/d04acf4a138545b692ebd530d832c218/Missionaries-at-border-spread-Christianity-to-North-Korea>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : inminban - <http://english.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk01500&num=15211>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : 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 the 5 spheres of life : planning to visit - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Patriarch-Kirill-will-visit-North-Korea.-Russian-orthodoxy-in-the-East-46412.html>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : seminary - <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/eap/208238.htm>

- Gender profile of persecution: "Sexual Violence Against Women by Officials" - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/31/north-korea-sexual-violence-against-women-officials>
- Gender profile of persecution: rape and - <https://kr.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/75/2017-Human-Rights-Report-DPRK.pdf>
- Gender profile of persecution: other sexual violence - <https://kr.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/75/2017-Human-Rights-Report-DPRK.pdf>
- Gender profile of persecution: normalized - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/01/you-cry-night-dont-know-why/sexual-violence-against-women-north-korea%20>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Falun Gong - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-falun-gong-05172019164536.html>
- Future outlook for the church: spoiler for talks - <http://www.hrninsider.org/2018/04/kim-jong-un-and-xi-jinping-as-close-as.html>

## Additional reports and articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for North Korea.

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/north-korea>.

### Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=North+Korea> (password: freedom).