
World Watch Research

North Korea: Persecution Dynamics

December 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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sweden@od.org | 019-31 05 00 | www.open-doors.se

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World Watch List 2025 – Top 50

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	98	96	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.7	11.1	94	93	92	91	92
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	89	89	88	87
4	Libya	16.0	16.2	15.9	16.2	16.4	10.6	91	91	88	91	92
5	Sudan	14.1	14.2	15.5	14.9	15.3	16.1	90	87	83	79	79
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.9	12.2	89	89	89	88	88
7	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.6	14.9	14.5	16.7	88	88	88	87	85
8	Pakistan	13.6	13.9	15.0	15.0	12.9	16.7	87	87	86	87	88
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.9	16.5	10.9	86	86	86	85	86
10	Afghanistan	15.6	15.9	15.9	16.4	16.7	5.0	85	84	84	98	94
11	India	12.2	12.9	13.3	14.9	13.9	16.5	84	83	82	82	83
12	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.8	16.6	3.3	81	81	80	81	78
13	Myanmar	12.6	11.1	13.5	14.1	12.9	16.5	81	79	80	79	74
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	13.0	15.2	15.6	80	79	76	70	67
15	China	13.2	10.1	12.8	14.6	16.1	11.1	78	78	77	76	74
16	Maldives	15.6	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.7	78	78	77	77	77
17	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.3	14.8	13.9	6.1	78	79	76	78	82
18	Syria	13.5	14.4	13.9	14.4	14.3	7.0	78	81	80	78	81
19	Algeria	14.7	14.3	11.5	14.7	16.0	6.3	77	79	73	71	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	14.0	15.6	76	75	71	68	67
21	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.6	12.9	14.3	8.3	74	71	69	69	67
22	Laos	11.8	10.7	13.5	14.1	13.9	9.8	74	75	68	69	71
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	2.8	74	72	72	70	71
24	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.7	11.3	10.4	16.1	74	71	69	68	67
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.5	12.4	15.5	4.4	73	71	71	71	71
26	Cuba	13.2	8.5	13.9	13.3	15.1	9.1	73	73	70	66	62
27	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	14.0	15.6	72	70	70	68	66
28	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	14.6	15.7	72	70	70	68	62

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
29	Turkmenistan	14.3	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.3	1.5	71	70	70	69	70
30	Nicaragua	12.4	7.6	13.7	13.3	14.1	9.6	71	70	65	56	51
31	Mexico	11.7	9.0	12.5	11.8	11.0	14.6	71	68	67	65	64
32	Oman	14.5	14.1	10.9	13.8	14.1	3.0	70	69	65	66	63
33	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	15.6	70	69	66	66	65
34	Tunisia	12.4	13.2	10.1	12.6	13.8	8.1	70	69	67	66	67
35	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	10.8	14.5	16.1	70	67	67	66	64
36	Bhutan	13.2	13.2	12.3	14.1	14.2	2.2	69	68	66	67	64
37	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.9	68	68	68	65	63
38	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.6	12.2	12.8	14.2	4.3	68	65	65	64	64
39	Tajikistan	14.1	12.7	12.7	13.2	13.7	1.9	68	66	66	65	66
40	Egypt	12.7	13.7	12.1	12.4	10.9	6.3	68	68	68	71	75
41	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.7	67	67	68	74	67
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	2.6	67	66	66	63	62
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.4	13.1	16.1	67	66	65	65	64
44	Vietnam	10.8	9.5	12.2	14.1	14.1	5.9	67	68	70	71	72
45	Turkey	13.0	11.7	11.7	13.2	11.5	5.4	67	64	66	65	69
46	Colombia	11.0	7.9	12.7	11.5	10.5	12.6	66	68	71	68	67
47	Kyrgyzstan	13.5	10.3	11.7	11.4	12.4	6.9	66	59	59	58	58
48	Brunei	14.8	14.8	10.8	10.8	14.0	0.6	66	66	65	64	64
49	Chad	11.0	8.2	10.2	9.9	10.3	15.9	65	61	58	55	53
50	Jordan	12.9	14.3	10.4	12.2	12.8	2.4	65	65	65	66	64

World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
51	Malaysia	12.8	13.7	11.7	12.4	11.2	3.0	65	64	66	63	63
52	Azerbaijan	13.3	10.2	9.6	12.2	13.7	5.6	65	60	59	60	56
53	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.9	64	63	64	63	62
54	Nepal	12.2	10.6	9.5	12.6	12.3	5.9	63	62	61	64	66
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.4	63	62	63	61	58
56	Russian Federation	12.7	7.9	10.7	13.1	14.1	4.4	63	58	57	56	57
57	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.1	1.7	61	61	60	59	56
58	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	61	64	64	63
59	Indonesia	10.9	11.9	10.9	11.6	10.2	5.7	61	66	68	68	63
60	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.6	61	61	62	62	62
61	Sri Lanka	12.7	8.7	11.5	11.5	8.5	7.6	60	60	57	63	62
62	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	10.3	10.7	12.1	0.2	60	60	60	59	58
63	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	14.6	59	57	55	52	48
64	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	12.1	9.4	58	58	57	50	42
65	Honduras	7.9	4.7	11.7	7.3	9.9	13.1	55	55	53	48	46
66	Togo	9.2	6.7	10.4	7.1	11.5	9.3	54	52	49	44	43
67	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	0.6	54	55	55	57	56
68	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	8.9	54	52	48	43	47
69	Ukraine	6.8	5.0	7.8	12.5	13.5	7.2	53	44	37	37	34
70	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	8.3	53	52	52	51	46
71	Venezuela	6.3	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	9.6	52	53	56	51	39
72	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	16.1	52	52	51	48	47
73	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	9.6	51	44	44	42	42
74	Lebanon	11.5	10.1	7.0	6.2	6.7	7.2	49	48	40	35	34
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	4.4	48	47	44	44	43
76	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	8.1	15.6	47	46	46	43	43

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
77	Belarus	9.9	3.7	5.0	10.8	14.1	3.1	47	46	43	33	30
78	Philippines	9.2	6.6	6.6	6.1	5.7	8.5	43	40	32	34	26

Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- [Background country information](#) (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.

Reporting period

The WWL 2025 reporting period was 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024.

Brief country details

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

North Korea: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
26,245,000	400,000	1.5

Map of country



Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

No matter whether North Korean Christians are heirs of the Christian communities from the time before the Korean War or whether they found Christian faith in other ways (e.g., during the great famine in the 1990s which caused tens of thousands of citizens to seek help in China, often finding it in Chinese churches), or whether they have come to faith more recently: When discovered by the

authorities they are deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, and their families will share their fate as well. This unceasingly strict policy has been illustrated by two reports published in 2023 and 2024 (see below: *Specific examples of violations*). Christians do not have the slightest space in society; meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible and if some dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy. The 'Anti-reactionary thought law' (enacted in December 2020) makes it amply clear in its Articles 28 and 29 that being a Christian and/or possessing a Bible is a serious crime and will be severely punished. The potential for digital surveillance is also strongly increasing. 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

Although outside the WWL 2025 reporting period, the news report by Radio Free Asia below is a rare case of persecution in North Korea being reported in the media. For security reasons, no further examples can be provided.

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

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 with their "inherited" denominational identity, they are not active affiliations. Every citizen is classified by the North Korean authorities into a social system called *Songbun*. Christians are classified under the 'hostile' classes and even have two subclasses of their own, namely class 37 for Protestant Christians and 39 for Catholic Christians. These classes generally apply to those Christians whose parents or grandparents were known to be Christians. For the largest part they were banished to isolated villages as a punishment for having the wrong *Songbun*. Due to the guilt-by-association principle, the descendants of those Christians face insurmountable social and other obstacles and are watched with suspicion. Some of the historical Christian communities were able to hide their faith and form an underground church.

Converts to Christianity

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

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no hotspots of violations of religious freedom in North Korea in the classical meaning of the phrase. Insurgency is unthinkable and the regime keeps a watchful eye on all citizens. For several years, the region bordering China might have been called a hotspot, since a constant stream of defections (with South Korea as the final intended destination) crossed this part of the country into China. But increased efforts from both sides, China and North Korea, have throttled this stream to a trickle. The border is now closely monitored and even with the help of brokers it has become difficult to make an illegal crossing, drastically reducing the stream of escapees. A new Chinese policy is calling for authorities to step up efforts in [preventing "defectors heading to South Korea"](#) (Daily NK, 2 August 2023). The fact that there are slightly more reports coming from the border regions does not necessarily point to a regional hotspot; it might simply be the case that these regions have more contact with the outside world.

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

Position on the World Watch List

North Korea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2025	98	1
WWL 2024	96	1
WWL 2023	98	1
WWL 2022	96	2
WWL 2021	94	1

With a brief hiatus in WWL 2022, North Korea has consistently ranked No.1. North Korea retains its spot at the top in WWL 2025 with pressure in all Spheres of life remaining at the maximum level and no changes observed. The violence score increased, since several groups of Christians were arrested and brought to labor camps. The regime is putting an ever stronger emphasis on ideological purity and purges viciously any perceived or real outside influence.

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.

Dictatorial paranoia - DPA (Very strong)

Since 1948, North Korea has been ruled by a single family, now in the third generation. While originally Communist ideology was followed, this influence has faded in recent years, although the Communist style of controlling society and managing the country lives on. North Korea is now a clear example of a country ruled by *Dictatorial paranoia*. Everyone has to revere the leadership and because of this

personality cult, Kim Jong Un is an irreplaceable figure in society - not least because he heads the Worker's Party, the army, the country's administration and all strands of society.

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

On several occasions in 2020, it was noticeable how Kim Jong Un failed to mention his father's or grandfather's beneficial work for North Korea and even skipped visiting their 'shrines' on such an important day as the 'Day of the Sun', the highest celebration in the country's calendar. This shows how much Kim Jong Un has consolidated his power and that no one can challenge his authority. The fact that Kim Jong Un [skipped the remembrance ceremony](#) for his father's birthday for the first time in 2023, simply sending a bouquet of flowers instead of attending in person, shows how much his rule seems consolidated (NK News, 18 February 2023). The continuing speculation about the leader's health also shows something of the unique position Kim Jong Un holds. This shift is also seen in North Korean documentaries, in which Kim Jong Un is not only depicted as being hard-working, but as giving everything for the country, portraying him even limping as an illustration of his sacrificial effort (Reuters, 1 February 2022); his father and grandfather would never have been shown in such a condition.

Signs of idolizing Kim Jong Un have increased in the WWL 2025 reporting period, according to country experts. The god-like worship of the rulers leaves absolutely no room for any other religion and anyone daring to revere anything or anybody besides the Kim dynasty in general - and Kim Jong Un in particular - is seen as dangerous and a threat to the state. Christians are therefore categorized as belonging to the 'hostile class' in North Korea's population classification system.

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

While in theory North Korea is still a Communist country, in practice a personality cult around the Kim family dominates. However, since the country is still run according to Communist administrative customs, CPCO is still indicated as a main engine, but it can be seen as being blended with (and even eclipsed by) *Dictatorial paranoia*. Additionally, the emphasis of its leader (and the means by which the country is ruled) is shifting away from the army and more towards the Korea's Workers Party, illustrated in the parade for the 75th anniversary of the Party in October 2020, which prominently displayed the

"Party's Army". This shows as well that (Post-)Communism still holds a strong influence. The outcome of the 7th Congress of the Korea's Workers Party in May 2016 – the first for 36 years – did not change anything visibly for either economic or ideological issues. Declaring itself a "nuclear weapons state" in 2022 has to be seen as a big achievement, both from the perspective of CPCO ("see how strong our state is") as well as from the perspective of *Dictatorial paranoia* (in terms of safety of the leader and personal prestige). Christians not only continue to be seen as dangerous and their religion as "opium for the people" – as in classical Communist ideology – but they are also part of the hostile class, according to the country's social stratification system called *Songbun*.

Drivers of persecution

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

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

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

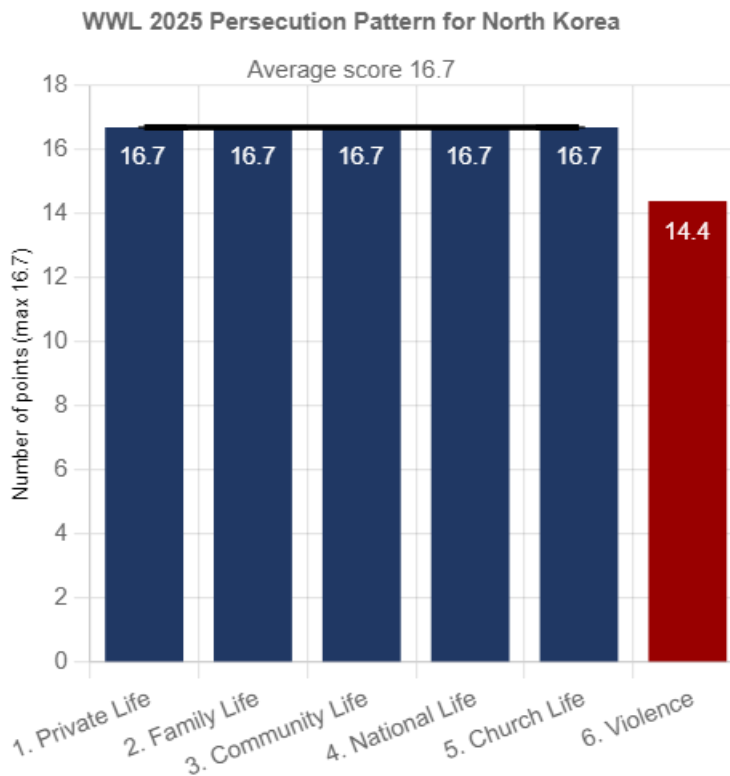
Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia and Communist and post-Communist oppression

- **Government officials (Very strong):** The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state, in the form of government as in the Ministry of State Security or the Ministry of Social Security and the Workers Party of Korea (WPK). The government is run according to Communist doctrine and consequently, the government is the strongest driver of persecution in this respect. For three generations, everything in the country has been focused on revering the Kim family leaders. This naturally continued when Kim Jong Un took over power in December 2011. The highest goal of all authorities is the survival of the country and its leader.
- **Political parties (Very strong):** The Workers Party of Korea (WPK) is the tool with which Kim Jong Un has tightened his grip on North Korea. The position of the Workers' Party is even higher than the government and the armed forces. Since Kim Jong Un decided to change the 'Military first' policy, the WPK has gained in importance, reflecting the Communist roots of the apparatus. The

WPK's rules and decisions are implemented, and Christians are regarded as enemies in the Party's ideology. They are also portrayed as a Trojan horse for terrorist activities.

- **Normal citizens (Strong):** Christians are seen as hostile elements in society and traitors which need to be eradicated in one way or another and every citizen is exposed to propaganda in this respect, being branded as "Civic education". Due to the constant indoctrination permeating the whole country, neighbors, colleagues and everyone else are watchful and are expected to report suspicious activities to the authorities, not least through the network of neighborhood informers.
- **(Extended) Family (Strong):** Even own family members are known to report a Christian to the authorities. Children, in particular, are influenced by the indoctrination constantly being taught at school and elsewhere and can believe it so strongly that they report their own parents, convinced that they are doing something good and right. Therefore, many parents prefer not to tell their children anything about their Christian faith, at least until their teenage years.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2025 Persecution pattern for North Korea shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in North Korea has stayed at maximum level over all *spheres of life*.
- Despite the regime's changing style of communication over recent years and - more recently - despite the country becoming less isolated internationally, 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 proba-

bly no other country on earth where the term paranoia fits better; it affects everything in North Korea and it increasingly focuses on Kim Jong Un himself. And even with this extremely high level of pressure, the 'Anti-reactionary thought law' puts another layer of restrictions on Christians.

- The violence score increased to an extreme level of 14.4 points in WWL 2025, as several groups of Christians were arrested and brought to labor camps. If a North Korean citizen is discovered to be a Christian, he or she will be arrested, interrogated, brought to a prison camp and/or killed.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2025 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

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

Simply possessing the Bible is considered a political crime against the nation and the leadership, confirmed by the new 'Anti-reactionary thought law'. Article 29 of the law stipulates that if someone possesses religious (in the law, "superstitious") media materials, the person will receive a sentence of at least 5 to 10 years. If the "crime" is considered serious, the sentence will be more than 10 years (although there is no definition of what is construed to be a "serious crime"). If the person shares or produces religious materials, the sentence ranges from life imprisonment to the death penalty. North Korean police and intelligence agents search homes without warning; such searches are done in a systematic way and normally occur once or twice a year. If they find Christian materials, the owners and their family can be banished, taken to a prison camp and potentially executed. The RFA report of April 2023 referred to above is a chilling example of this policy.

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

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

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

North Korea tries hard to control all broadcasting and media. People who access any unapproved media or broadcasting can be punished, including the use of USB/SD devices. Although access is

technically possible and is done by some citizens in the border regions, it comes at a very high risk. According to one country expert, an estimated 20% of North Korean citizens follow foreign broadcasting by radio and the regime has started a campaign to weed out all exposure to such broadcasts by meting out harsh punishments. This campaign intensified in the WWL 2025 reporting period and reportedly even led to a few public killings. The regime considers radio receivers as something highly dangerous, let alone a smartphone or the Internet. Therefore, listening to Christian radio is a very dangerous act. If Christians dare to do so, they will only listen well-hidden at nighttime, constantly on the alert for checks by the security forces.

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

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

Block 1 – Additional information

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

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

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

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

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

It is highly dangerous for parents to share their Christian faith with their children. In fact, their own children are among the most dangerous people for them. Open Christian education is impossible, as the children are indoctrinated by the state, starting from a very young age, literally from the cradle. A country expert described the situation as follows: Children are taught and "raised primarily as a citizen of the Kim regime, and secondarily as being a member of an individual family. Hence, parental terms are often associated with the Kim ruling family to further this perception and a de-emphasis on usual nuclear family influence, which would include the raising of a child with religious convictions." Children are taught that Christians are the enemies of the people and to have a "natural hatred" against them. Consequently, parents have to take what one observer called a "passive approach". This may happen, for example, by trying to share biblical stories disguised as fairy tales, thus indirectly teaching them Christian norms and values.

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

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

Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (4.00 points)

As a country expert explains: "When a [Christian] is arrested as a political criminal, it is common for the family of the arrested believer to have no hope of seeing the arrested believer again. Moreover, the remaining family members cannot remain in mourning, but must prepare to deal with the consequences of the case, for they too will be punished by the guilt-by-association principle".

Block 2 – Additional information

The maximum score in this sphere of life is reflected in one commentator's statement: "Even for pre-schoolers, it is about shaping their perceptions and worldview at a very tender age". If Christians are discovered, they will lose everything, so in many cases the questions asked in Block 2 are not applicable to the situation in North Korea, as the consequences are so much severer. Christians will not only be interrogated to find out about their networks, their children will not only face discrimination, whole families (even across generations) will face arrest due to the guilt-by-association principle, and all will

face years of misery in labor camps. Families are deliberately broken up if someone's faith is discovered. If both husband and wife are Christians, they may be sent to different labor camps. Celebrating Christian weddings, funerals or a Communion service openly is out of the question.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

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

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

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

All residents of North Korea are required to participate in the ubiquitous activities of the Juche ideology, including bowing to statues of the Kim family on the way to and from work, home or school and in praising and worshipping the Kim dynasty. Christians (whose faith has remained undiscovered) have to participate in such daily practices (as well as in the national ceremonies) for their survival. Absentees are under suspicion of being potential reactionaries and can be targeted for comprehensive investigation. The idolization of Kim Jong Un has reportedly become more pronounced in the reporting period of WWL 2025. The weekly self-criticism and study sessions should be seen under this Block 3.5 aspect as well. Christians who are discovered, are interrogated and brought to the camps where the pressure to renounce their faith would continue, although by different means.

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

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

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

Random interrogation by the police or secret service is common in North Korea. The crackdown teams are usually composed of officials from regional government organs, such as MPS (police), MSS, and the region's Workers' Party. All North Koreans can be targeted, the purpose being to root out any 'anti-socialist activities' or 'anti-revolutionary acts'. This makes Christians very vulnerable to exposure since one of the purposes of the interrogation is to discover 'Christian spies'. Moreover, people monitor their neighbors and report to the authorities when they find something suspicious. The interrogation (and related torture) is one of the main aspects feared by escapees from North Korea, when they are forcefully repatriated, according to one country expert.

Block 3 – Additional information

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

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

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

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

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

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

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

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (4.00 points)

All North Korean media are controlled by the government. They demonize Christians as robbers, cheats, spies for the Americans, and traitors to the nation. Not only the mass media, but also school textbooks and other published books, movies, official documents, and ideology study materials describe Christians in a negative way. Missionaries have been portrayed as wolves in sheep's clothing, ready to manipulate and mislead innocent North Koreans.

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

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

Block 4 – Additional information

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

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

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Block 5 – Additional information

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

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.

Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers:

- *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

4. The symbol “x” in the table:

- *This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.*

North Korea: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2025	WWL 2024
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	x	x
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	x	x
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	x	x
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	x	x
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	x	x

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

5 Year trends

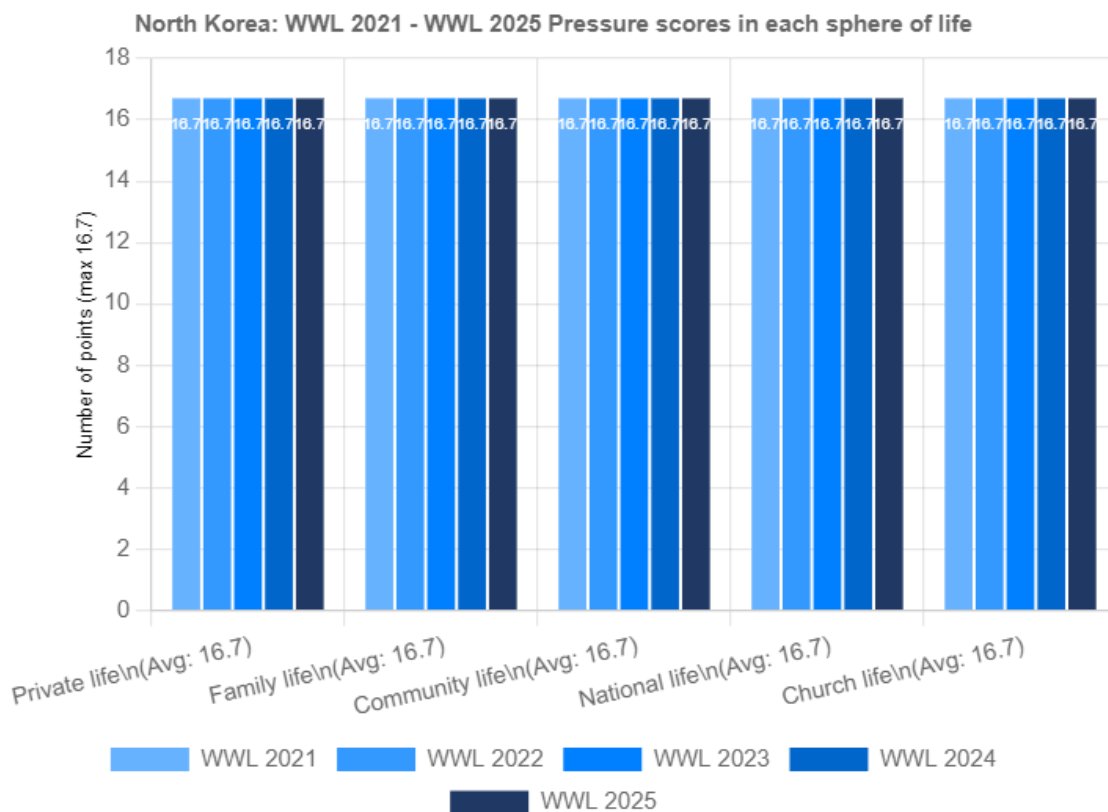
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

North Korea: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2025	16.7
2024	16.7
2023	16.7
2022	16.7
2021	16.7

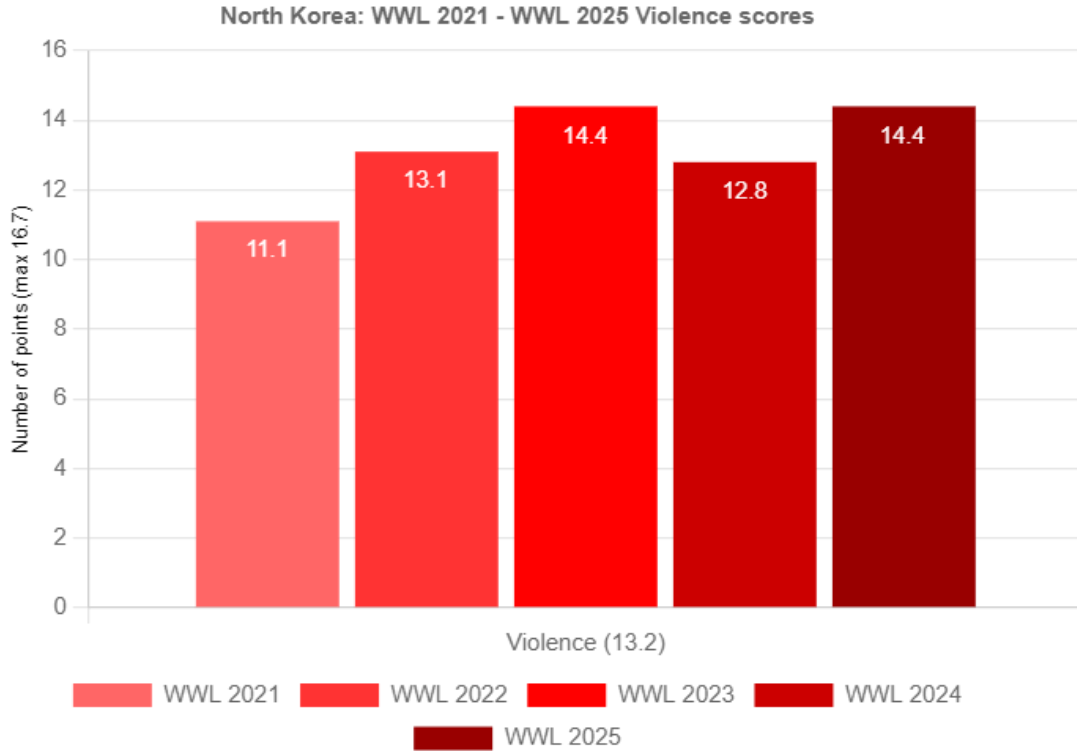
In the chart above it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians stayed at the maximum level in the last five reporting periods, showing that Kim Jong Un is proving to be a worthy successor to his father and grandfather as far as violations of religious freedom (as well as the invention of methods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

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



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

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows a gradual increase in the score for violence since WWL 2021. After a slight decrease in WWL 2024, the score is back to its previous extreme level of violence.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

North Korea	Female Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trafficking Violence – physical Violence – psychological Violence – sexual

In North Korea, tens of thousands of Christians are in prison camps for their faith, with women and girls as likely as men and boys to be imprisoned, interrogated, tortured or killed for being a suspected Christian. Repatriated female defectors and female prisoners in DPRK labor camps remain especially vulnerable to sexual violence and rape during the interrogation process, as well as in daily prison life. One country expert summarized: “Christian female prisoners are exposed to more severe sexual

violence ... because Christian prisoners are treated worse than normal criminals; they are not even considered as human beings.”

These assaults likely represent a mere fraction of the total abuse committed against Christian women in any given year. North Korean authorities understand the importance of sexual purity in Christian values, and tactically use sexual abuse to intimidate and humiliate. An expert comments “Since Korean culture is a shame-based one, being the victim of actual sexual abuse or rape would have a devastating effect on a Christian woman or girl and could even threaten the foundation of her faith ... many would become withdrawn and often filled with guilt, even though the sexual encounter was non-consensual”. A [UN report](#) on the human rights violations against women in the DPRK highlights that rape, other sexual violence and torture in detention facilities of women is endemic, and guards are known to sexually abuse or exploit female prisoners (United Nations 2020 report).

In addition, sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and girls has become part of everyday life in North Korea, with women holding no power to resist or report this abuse (HRW 2018 report, “[You cry at night but you don’t know why](#)”). The UN has condemned North Korea’s intensive and pervasive women’s rights violations, including gender-based violence, discrimination and enforcement of restrictive gender stereotypes ([HRW 2024, country chapter North Korea](#)).

An estimated 80% of all North Korean escapees are women. Many North Korean women and girls who flee to China for safety are then preyed on by traffickers, raped and sold into sexual slavery in the 'Red Zone' ([DW, 27 March 2023](#)). They may face repeated trafficking, and a continuous cycle of violence from those who purchased them, and may be sold as 'brides'. North Korean refugees in China are in a highly precarious situation, with Chinese authorities resuming repatriating defectors to North Korea against their will. Some go to great lengths to reach South Korea. The fear of being repatriated and sent back to the draconian prison camps run by the North Korean regime is such that some female escapees carry tiny canisters of poison, such as arsenic, to avoid this fate.

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

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

North Korea	Male Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
<p>Economic harassment via business/job/work access Military/militia conscription/service against conscience Violence – physical</p>	

All Christians in North Korea face chronic and brutal persecution, but the ways in which men and women experience faith-based oppression and abuse are partly different. 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 must confirm their attendance at work and cannot stop working for any private reason, making it harder for them to flee the country than women. Job allocation, freedom of movement and quality of life aligns with the “[songbun](#)” social status system, with Christians at the bottom of the pile, viewed as enemies of the state (HRW, 5 July 2016).

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

Ideological pressures on men and boys are particularly immense during military service, due to the male-orientated culture which elevates traits such as brutality, hatred of perceived enemies, absolute loyalty to the Kim regime, and revenge. Christian values such as kindness and forgiveness are ridiculed by training officers. The mandatory 10-year military conscription (starting at 17 for male youths, females are also selectively conscripted) 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. Those with an identifiable Christian connection are consigned to the lowest forms of work, such as hard labor in remote locations, working on mines, sawmills and nuclear test sites. They are denied party membership and access to university education. Those known or even just suspected to be Christian believers are removed from society for life, imprisoned, banished or killed. Christian men routinely suffer rough methods of interrogation and torture, as well as mistreatment and physical labor in the widely-feared prison camps in operation throughout North Korea.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023](#) North Korea):

- “Korea Future stated that both ordinary citizens and officials illicitly practiced Shamanism. Investigators documented many persons engaging both publicly and privately in Shamanistic practices, including traditional rituals, fortune telling, physiognomy (reading the fate of an individual based on facial features), exorcism, use of talismans, use of birth charts, and tarot cards. One source told RFA it was common for individuals to consult fortune tellers before planning weddings, making business deals, handling health matters, or considering other important decisions. Another source told *Asia Press* that government officials also consulted fortune tellers about their health and careers. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of Shamanism.”

Further information:

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

Trends Summary

1) COVID-19 exacerbated economic challenges and food shortages

Kim Jong Un himself admitted in May 2022 that COVID-19 infections had begun to be recorded in the country. The North Korean authorities had always rejected international offers of medical assistance, including those from the WHO and its Covax program (BBC News, 1 September 2021). The regime would seem to prefer to accept aid from neighboring China rather than having to agree to work with other international partners. Regime survival has been the most important goal for decades. It is thus not surprising that a particularly challenging social and economic environment is answered by a tightening of control and strengthening of state-owned shops and enterprises. The BBC released a [report on life in North Korea](#) in 2023 interviewing three citizens within the country, which exposed “the disaster unfolding there since the government sealed the borders more than three years ago”. The insights into the desperate personal lives of a number of citizens ties in well with reports on the [worsening food shortages](#) (NK News, 16 June 2023). The conclusion drawn by an expert on North Korea, Professor Andrei Lankov, is quite sobering in the BBC report. He states: "If people don't trust

each other, there is no starting point for resistance. ... What that means is North Korea can stabilize and last for years and decades to come."

However, other observers hold a contrasting opinion: Michael Kirby, for instance, who has chaired the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since its inception in 2013, claims adamantly on the occasion of the 10 anniversary of publishing the COI report on the Human Rights situation in North Korea: "But [nothing in international affairs stands still for long](#), particularly given the dangers that the DPRK poses to its neighbors and the world. Change will come, possibly suddenly. So much is certain as a lesson of history" (NK News, 12 June 2023). Whichever conclusion one draws, the fact remains that Christians in the country are at the bottom of the pile. They share the economic misery in the country, but also suffer as being classed as unwanted citizens. It may be no surprise then, that the UNHRC adopted a resolution on 5 April 2024 calling for an update to the 2014 Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean human rights abuses. The 2014 COI had [documented](#) extensive human rights violations in the DPRK and formally recommended that North Korea be referred to the International Criminal Court (UNHRC, 17 February 2014).

2) Less isolation

The country's isolation remains significant, but some aspects are changing. The international community in North Korea has continued its exodus and is estimated to amount to less than 300 people. Independent reporting from North Korea has been virtually impossible for some years already, but even a neutral or just 'another' view from observers inside the country is increasingly hard to come by. The international community is trying to make sense of what is happening in the country, including leadership speculation (see below: Trend #5). At the same time, North Korea announced a series of [embassy closures](#) around the world, mainly in (but not limited to) Africa (Reuters, 31 October 2023). This move sees more than 20% of all North Korean diplomatic representations across the globe closed down, bringing down the number of active embassies from 53 to 43. Representations in Angola, Bangladesh, DRC, Guinea, Hong Kong, Libya, Nepal, Senegal, Spain and Uganda were affected. The reasons for this move are not clear, but most likely varied. One reason may be a [lack of resources](#), so that authorities have to focus and concentrate expenses as much as possible (East Asia Forum, 8 December 2023). Another reason may be the acknowledgment that it has become more and more difficult to earn [hard currency](#) via embassies over the years (38North, 13 December 2023).

The main change is that while North Korea is sure to stay high on the list of US priorities, the leadership appears increasingly comfortable in relying on support from China and Russia, and seemingly values being courted by Russia in its need of weapons. From the North Korean regime's current point of view, Russia and China can do no wrong. It seems that North Korea's leader has seen the geopolitics around him changing and has drawn his conclusions (NK News, 18 August 2022). His vow in June 2023 to "[hold hands](#)" with President Putin and bolster strategic cooperation, fits this pattern (Reuters, 12 June 2023). Consequently, Kim Jong Un [travelled to Russia](#) and arguably the most needed result he brought home was the promise of Russian grain being delivered to North Korea, reportedly in exchange for munition and weapons (War on the Rocks, 12 September 2023). The "holding hands" reached a new high in June and further in October 2024 - see below Trends Analysis #4, which indicates that North Korea's isolation is diminishing. Towards South Korea, the regime follows a hardening policy.

3) Increasing self-confidence amid warming ties with China

While China may be unhappy or at least uneasy with its neighbor's behavior and its ideology of self-reliance, it still has many reasons to keep North Korea afloat. The close and warm ties were praised at the 60th anniversary of the China-NK [friendship treaty](#), but the enthusiasm and ideological proximity may have given way to geopolitical considerations and power balancing (38North, 30 June 2021), even more so after the Ukraine war turned hot and with a US distracted by events in the Middle East as well. The remaining geopolitical considerations are:

- The unpredictability of any scenario if the Kim regime were to collapse;
- The stability of the whole region and the question whether North Korea's nuclear weapons could be a potential danger for China itself;
- In the event of any form of North-South re-unification, it is likely that US troops would be stationed directly at China's border.

However, this does not mean that the relationship between North Korea and China is free from tensions. This was becoming evident when North Korean authorities [strongly criticized](#) China's joint declaration with Japan and South Korea issued at the end of their trilateral summit (Reuters, 29 May 2024). The declaration merely stated that the three parties 'reiterated their positions on regional peace and stability [and the] denuclearization of the Korean peninsula ...'. China had reportedly insisted on watering down previous versions which had called for 'pursuing denuclearization'. Even so, North Korea called the declaration a grave political provocation that violates its sovereignty. While the significance of this incident should not be overestimated – especially since the general North Korea-China relationship seems to be well on track and even deepening – the criticism may do more than simply reveal North Korean sensitivity. It may also be indicative of the growing self-confidence of North Korea and its leader and may make China even more weary of the country. In any case, warming ties with China are bad news for Christians and a more technically sophisticated border control is also making unofficial contact with China much more difficult for Christians, as can be seen in the supervision of public transport in China by facial recognition technology.

4) Enter Russia as a welcome diplomatic alternative

In his first visit to North Korea since 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin not only reaffirmed friendly relations with North Korea, but also signed a [mutual defense pact](#) (Reuters, 19 June 2024). This can be used as justifying more weapons and ammunitions deliveries from the country to Russia in its ongoing war with Ukraine. Apart from receiving payments in terms of grain and foreign currency, North Korea also benefits from knowhow transfer in ballistics and rocket technology. The fact that President Putin also visited the Russian Orthodox church in Pyongyang can be seen as lending credibility to North Korea's claim that there are churches and even freedom of religion in the country. In a significant widening and intensification of the cooperation, it has been reported that up to 12,000 [North Korean troops](#) are preparing to support Russia in its effort to conquer the Ukraine (Reuters, 31 October 2024) and have already participated in active fighting. In how far this has [domestic repercussions](#) in North Korea (38 North, 21 November 2024) and if this fact is even widely known and can be discussed, remains to be seen.

5) Another year of leadership speculation

As far as the question of future leadership is concerned, North Korea remains a mystery, even more so now that the foreign community within North Korea (which has always acted as a valuable source of information) has become so small. Kim Jong Un's health has been an object of speculation, even though he is only about forty years old (NK News, 8 June 2021). Even a mere bandage or a "[mysterious spot](#)" leads to media coverage and speculation (NK News, 2 August 2021). What would happen if he would be suddenly incapacitated is anyone's guess, but one of the safer bets is that 'family blood' would be more important than any other consideration. Up until recently, analysts have focused on his sister, but ever since Kim Jong Un's young daughter has repeatedly appeared at official events and in news broadcasts, observers have been busy trying to guess the [reasons](#) for this (NK News, 13 February 2023). For the time being, the idolization of Kim Jong Un is strengthened and for the first time, officials have been spotted wearing [lapel pins](#) with his image on it (Time, 1 July 2024).

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

This much seems clear, however: The regime knows full well the danger of a citizenry becoming more aware of what is going on outside the country and the danger of a new generation paying [lip service](#) to state ideology rather than being convinced by it (DailyNK, 25 April 2024). Thus, it will do everything necessary to stay in control, and speculation about the future or potential change 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 undoubtedly also be felt by Christians.

Further useful reports

Further background information per country and a selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
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External Links

- Copyright, sources and definitions: Background country information - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
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- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: 30 April 2023 - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/church-05262023115519.html>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: returning - <http://https://apnews.com/d04acf4a138545b692ebd530d832c218/Missionaries-at-border-spread-Christianity-to-North-Korea>
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: preventing “defectors” - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kunming-steps-up-efforts-prevent-defectors-heading-south-korea/>
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: prison camp and total control zones - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Prisons-of-North-Korea-English.pdf>
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: 2021 publication - https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Bermudez_KLS25_FINAL.pdf
- Persecution engines description: growing personality cult - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/efforts-ramp-up-to-promote-kim-jong-un-personality-cult/>
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- Persecution engines description: skipped the remembrance ceremony - <https://www.nknews.org/2023/02/kim-jong-un-appears-to-skip-ceremony-for-fathers-birthday-for-first-time/>
- Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (4.00 points): Anti-reactionary thought law - <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-issues-orders-regarding-young-violators-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: UN report - https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf
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- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2023 North Korea - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/>
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- Persecution of other religious minorities: Falun Gong - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-falun-gong-05172019164536.html>
- Trends Summary: report on life in North Korea - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/bskbb4rmae/inside-north-korea>
- Trends Summary: worsening food shortages - <https://www.nknews.org/2023/06/what-to-make-of-reports-that-hungry-north-koreans-are-resorting-to-cannibalism/>
- Trends Summary: nothing in international affairs stands still for long - <https://www.nknews.org/2023/06/what-we-can-learn-from-un-inquiry-into-north-korean-human-rights-10-years-on/>
- Trends Summary: documented - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-idprk/reportofthe-commissionof-inquiry-dprk>

- Trends Summary: embassy closures - <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-koreas-closure-africa-embassies-sign-economic-hardships-souths-ministry-2023-10-31/>
- Trends Summary: lack of resources - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/12/08/north-korean-embassy-closures-point-to-struggle-and-starvation/>
- Trends Summary: hard currency - <https://www.38north.org/2023/12/north-koreas-de-risking-strategy-and-its-implications/>
- Trends Summary: hold hands - <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-koreas-kim-vows-hold-hands-with-putin-strategic-cooperation-2023-06-11/>
- Trends Summary: travelled to Russia - <https://warontherocks.com/2023/09/north-koreas-coming-breakout/>
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- Trends Summary: North Korean troops - <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-we-know-about-north-korean-troops-joining-russias-war-ukraine-2024-10-21/>
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