



NORTH KOREA: Country dossier

April 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

Rank	Country	1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
		Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

NORTH KOREA – Country dossier (April 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

NORTH KOREA		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	94	1
WWL 2017	92	1
WWL 2016	92	1
WWL 2015	92	1
WWL 2014	90	1

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding North Korea

Link for general background information:

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

Recent country history

Understanding North Korea means understanding its leadership and personality cult. In its early years, from independence in 1945, the country followed the Communist path and faced 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. The other is “Kimilsungism”, the worship of the leaders who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea. The country wants to be taken seriously and it wants to be heard internationally, which is one of the reasons why its leaders strive to advance its rocket and nuclear technology, making the world aware of its continued existence.

The religious landscape

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 are easier lived in secret without anyone noticing. Christianity, on the contrary, is seen as a dangerous foreign religion which has to be viciously fought against. Therefore, Christians have no room in North Korea and consequently must live their lives in utmost secrecy. Gathering in large groups is absolutely impossible for Christians; indeed it is life-threatening to be even recognized as being a Christian.

The political landscape

Kim Jong Un has been demonstrating a different style of leadership from his father, and is trying to resemble his grandfather more, by appearing more 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 central positions in all important powerhouses: party, state and army by holding the position of First Secretary of Korea’s Workers Party.

Hopes that Kim Jong Un would chose a path of reform diminished in the course of 2012 and 2013 after economic reforms were not pursued, and several nuclear and rocket tests continue. Nevertheless, informal private economy flourishes and helps the country and its people to survive. In addition to the nuclear tests mentioned above, Kim Jong Un seems keen to isolate the country from the few remaining “friendly” nations. He did not mince words in denouncing China’s current development, when opening the 7th Party Congress in May 2016, by saying: “Despite the filthy wind of bourgeois liberty and reform and openness blowing in our neighborhood, we let the spirit of songun [military-first] rifles fly and advance according to the path of socialism that we have chosen.”

The assassination of Kim Jong Un’s half-brother Kim Jong Nam in public at the airport in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017 shows the recklessness of the regime once it perceives itself as threatened.⁴ US American student Otto Warmbier’s death after a surprise release and 14 months labor camp highlighted the dire situation of the country’s camp system.⁵

The socio-economic landscape

Influenced by Confucianism – a Chinese ethical and philosophical system – 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.

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. The country needs international aid, which causes new problems as the regime restricts access to the citizens in need. On the other hand, a growing informal private sector with markets appears especially in the larger cities. People are getting increasingly used to this sort of trading, which at least in theory runs counter to the country’s teachings.

⁴ For details, see: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/15/exclusive-two-female-secret-agents-behind-murder-kim-jong-unsbrother/>, last accessed 31 July 2017.

⁵ For details, see: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/anger-tears-otto-completes-journey-home/>, last accessed 31 July 2017.

One other important means of earning hard currency is the sending of migrant workers to other countries, even to Europe.⁶ But this has its challenges for the regime as well as a group defection of 13 North Korean waitresses working in North Korean restaurants in April 2016 showed.⁷ Reportedly, the regime sent out 300 agents with orders to abduct South Korean citizens as “retaliation”. This would not be the first time the regime is doing this and would also endanger Christians. High-level defection has become an increasing problem in the reporting period with a senior officer of the Reconnaissance General Bureau fleeing in Spring 2016 and a senior diplomat stationed in London seeking asylum there with his family in August 2016.⁸

Concluding remarks

When it comes to protecting its ideology, North Korea does not care about international reputation or even 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 case⁷ showed to a shocked world how dire the situation in North Korea’s labor camps must be – publicity that the country tries to avoid by all means. However, even these recent incidents will change neither its politics nor the international community’s response, and Christians will remain in hiding, trying to survive, just as they did over the last decades.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
25,405,000	300,000	1.2

Source: OD estimate for number of Christians

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. Whichever statistics are used, all accounts show that the domestic Church is slowly but steadily growing.

⁶ See: <https://news.vice.com/article/cash-for-kim-how-north-koreans-are-working-themselves-to-death-in-europe>, last accessed 5 November 2017.

⁷ See: <https://www.nknews.org/2016/04/13-n-korean-restaurant-workers-defect-to-s-korea-mou/>, last accessed 5 November 2017.

⁸ See: <https://www.nknews.org/2016/08/north-korean-defector-diplomat-is-in-south-korea-mou/>, last accessed 5 November 2017.

How did Christians get there?

In 1603 a Korean diplomat returned from Beijing carrying several theological books written by a Jesuit missionary to 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.⁹

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 (officially in 1910) unintentionally caused a great upsurge in the numbers of Christians and 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 Japanese defeat in World War II, Kim Il Sung came to power and imposed 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 500,000 believers in North Korea. Just ten years later, there was no visible presence of them anymore.

What church networks exist today?¹⁰

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist

Source: WCD, May 2017

⁹ According to: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Korea, last accessed August 2017.

¹⁰ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

In the capital Pyongyang, one official Catholic church, two Protestant churches and, since 2006, a Russian-Orthodox church have been built and hold services. Defectors testify that these churches serve as showpieces. There is no level 3 information available concerning the underground networks.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ¹¹
300,000							

Source: Open Doors estimate 2017

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) reports that traditionally Buddhism and Confucianism have the most followers, but the regime has been widely successful in its attempts to eradicate all religions. Open Doors does not agree with this statement by ARDA.

Notes on the current situation

- Since 2001, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom labelled North Korea a country of particular concern; this was repeated in each report until today.
- There has been a religious studies program at Kim Il Sung University since 1998. The graduates are sent to work for officially recognized religious federations, the foreign trade sector or with border guards to identify clandestine religious activity. Many are recruited as spies in order to denounce Christian activities in the country.
- The border to China has become more tightly controlled making the situation for Christians on both sides of the border difficult. The murder of Korean-Chinese Christian Han-Choong Ryol by North Korean assassins in China in April 2016 illustrates the risks involved.
- It can be dangerous for Christians from the USA (or affiliated with the USA) to travel to North Korea. In 2017, two US-Korean citizens working for the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology were arrested on trumped up charges.

¹¹ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 94 / Position: 1

WWL 2017 Points: 92 / Position: 1

WWL 2016 Points: 92 / Position: 1

Where persecution comes from

The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state. For three generations, everything in the country focused on revering the leading Kim family. The paranoia of the leader has increased with the country's growing isolation due to the recent series of nuclear and missile tests and resulting sanctions. Christians are seen as hostile elements in society which have to be eradicated. Due to the constant indoctrination permeating the whole country, neighbors and even family members are highly watchful and report anything suspicious to the authorities. Especially children can believe in the indoctrination 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.

How Christians are suffering

If 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 even have the slightest space in society, on the contrary, they are publically warned against. Meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible and if some believers dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy. The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.

Examples

There have been raids against Christians and killings, but no details can be published for security reasons. Canadian-Korean pastor Hyeon Soo Lim was released from prison on 9 August 2017, after allegedly having confessed his guilt. Pastor Dong-cheol Kim, however, is still detained in North Korea. Two Korean-American Christians and lecturers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), Tony Kim and Hak-song Kim, were arrested in April and May 2017 respectively. North Korea accused them of behavior against the regime. In a [change of hiring policy](#), PUST is now reportedly looking for non-American staff.¹²

¹² See: <https://www.nknews.org/2017/10/pyongyang-university-no-longer-seeking-american-volunteers/?c=1508909752924>, last accessed 15 November 2017.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 94 / Position: 1

WWL 2017 Points: 92 / Position: 1

WWL 2016 Points: 92 / Position: 1

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

North Korea has been No.1 since WWL 2002 and remains at this position, with an increase of 2 points compared to WWL 2017. But this year it is very closely followed by Afghanistan at No.2. Although the situation for Christians in the two countries is very different, in terms of scoring they are very 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 increase in score for North Korea¹ is partly due to the further increased government paranoia caused by the country’s self-imposed isolation from the world, including from its most important neighbor, China.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in North Korea ¹³	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Very strong

¹³ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

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. 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 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.

Even though his power may not be as absolute as his father’s or grandfather’s, no one can challenge his authority. 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. 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”. In October 2017, Kim Jong Un promoted his sister³ 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.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in North Korea	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Not at all
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium

Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state, in government and party. For three generations, everything in the country has focused on the reverence of the leading Kim family and this has not ceased with the youngest generation, when Kim Jong Un took over power in December 2011. 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 report suspicious activities to the authorities. Even own family members report a Christian to the authorities, as especially children can believe in indoctrination 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.

Context

The country's political system is based upon two ideologies. One is called *Juche*, basically saying that the state is self-reliant. The other is *Kimilsungism*, the worship of the leaders, who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea. Everyone has to attend weekly meetings where all citizens from every age are ideologically trained and indoctrinated. Attendance of self-criticism sessions is mandatory. No one is allowed to develop deviating ideas, be they religious or other. The system of strict social control results in high self-censorship and self-control on what to say to whom, even in the most private and family relationships. There is a North Korean saying which illustrates the mindset of society well: "Wherever two or three are gathered together, one is a spy."

Hopes that Kim Jong Un would be more open for improvements in economic, social and diplomatic conditions, when he took over power in December 2011, have faltered. The regime seems to be eager to isolate the country yet further, even without the continued missile and nuclear tests, war rhetoric and threats of firing an inter-continental ballistic weapon not just at Guam, but at the American mainland too. All these tests could be seen as an effort trying to force major powers and neighbors back to the negotiating table. However, so far, the country has only been pushed into further political and economic isolation, reflected in several countries [closing North Korean embassies](#).¹⁴

Into the sixth year of his leadership, Kim Jong Un did not visit any foreign state (nor was he visited by a foreign head of state) until March 2018.¹⁵ He even decided to offend close allies and

¹⁴ See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-diplomacy-factbox/factbox-countries-which-have-expelled-north-korean-ambassadors-after-nuclear-test-idUSKCN1BUOED>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

¹⁵ See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/03/28/chinas-official-release-on-kim-jong-uns-visit-annotated/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e708572b61cf, last accessed 20 April 2018.

partner states by increasingly annoying his major ally China. Kim Jong Un did not mince words in denouncing China's current development, when opening the 7th Party Congress by saying: "Despite the filthy wind of bourgeois liberty and reform and openness blowing in our neighborhood, we let the spirit of Songun [military-first] rifles fly and advanced according to the path of socialism that we had chosen." These are strong words and given that China is basically the only remaining state North Korea can rely on, the chilling attitude towards this last ally seems to indicate that the regime takes pleasure in increasing its isolation. Adding to this observation, in November 2017, Kim Jong Un [decided not to officially receive](#)¹⁶ a high-ranking Chinese envoy, showing the cooling relations of both countries. But the most visible sign of this has been the very public killing of his half-brother Kim Jong Nam at the airport in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017. International media reporting this assassination failed to highlight the diplomatic fallout which resulted, since North Korea had up until then enjoyed reasonably good relations with Malaysia, which has now suspended all ties for the time being.

Although most North Koreans are not suffering from starvation as they did in the 1990s, the supply of basic needs remains a challenge due to geographical and weather conditions. Hunger is an ever present enemy, day in and day out. Large percentages of the population are undernourished and the percentage of stunted children remains high. The situation is further aggravated by the regime's refusal to cooperate with international organizations and to grant them access to the areas most affected. In July 2017, the UN food agency has warned that due to exceptionally dry weather conditions in April-June, this year's harvest of rice, maize, potatoes and soybean in particular are expected to be very poor. Another indicator for this is the soldier who crossed the DMZ in November 2017 and was seriously wounded. During a medical check, [many parasites](#)¹⁷ were found in the defector's digestive tract. Given that he was an elite soldier tasked with guarding the inner-Korean border, he should have had a rather better diet than the average citizen. On the other hand, the economic situation has improved slightly since the government granted a certain level of "marketization". This does not, of course, mean anything close to a market economy, but it at least leaves people with more room to maneuver. A [report](#)¹⁸ published in August 2017 reveals that an estimated 5 million people, roughly 20% of the population either directly or indirectly rely on the market system in North Korea.

One should not make too much out of this "marketization" development, however, as was shown at the 7th Party Congress of the Korea Workers' Party, held in May 2016. Expectations for reforms being announced, especially in the economic sector, were running high among foreign observers, but the outcome was meagre. Given that the Party Congress was the first of its kind since 36 years, the regime chose to focus on re-emphasizing ideology and the dominant role of party and leader and more or less [neglected economic](#)¹⁹ and other topics. Christians would most

¹⁶ See: http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/11/21/2017112101376.html, last accessed 27 November 2017.

¹⁷ See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-defection-soldi/injured-defectors-parasites-and-diet-hint-at-hard-life-in-north-korea-idUSKBN1DH0RL?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29, last accessed 27 November 2017.

¹⁸ See: <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=14676&catald=nk01500>, 22 August 2017, last accessed 28 September 2017.

¹⁹ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/parallel-thoughts/korea-lankov-05172016171754.html>, last accessed 2 December 2016.

likely benefit from an improved economic situation, just as any other citizens. But difficulties in the supply of basic needs probably affect them more since Christians tend to belong to the poorer classes of society. Another particular challenge for them is the ubiquitous use of bribes, which goes against their Christian faith.

One important means of earning hard currency is to send migrant workers to other countries, even to [Europe](#)²⁰ and to extort from them almost everything they are earning. If this is how they are dealing with the population's loyal class, which can be "trusted" enough to be sent abroad, it is hard to imagine what they are doing with the hostile class to which Christians belong. But this practice constitutes an increasing challenge for the regime in times of tightening international sanctions. The [international sanctions](#),²¹ set up in 2017 as a response to the country's continued nuclear and missile tests, are starting to bite hard and North Korea is struggling to obtain sources of hard currency and is increasingly [looking to Russia for help](#).²²

Defection in general has become more complex due to China reinforcing its stretches of border fencing. Reportedly, China increasingly [arrests and repatriates](#)²³ North Korean refugees and this continuing practice could also endanger Christians. The prices which [brokers](#)²⁴ charge to North Koreans seeking to enter China illegally have "skyrocketed" in the last months. Whereas the price at the end of 2016 averaged \$8,900 per defector, charges have been as high as \$16,000 in 2017. Finally, times of increased tension with South Korea are always times of heightened propaganda and stronger ideological checks. These leave Christians under higher pressure.

As the regime in North Korea is Communist, all religions are seen as "superstitious" and therefore fought against. However, Asian religions (like Buddhism) have a little more room for maneuver. They are not seen as something Western and practicing them can be done secretly with less danger.

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:

They 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

²⁰ See: <https://news.vice.com/article/cash-for-kim-how-north-koreans-are-working-themselves-to-death-in-europelast>, last accessed 2 December 2016.

²¹ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/workers-08242017140117.html>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

²² See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-russia-analysis/russia-throws-north-korea-lifeline-to-stymie-regime-change-idUSKBN1C91X2?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium, last accessed 27 November 2017.

²³ See: <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk01500&num=14671>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

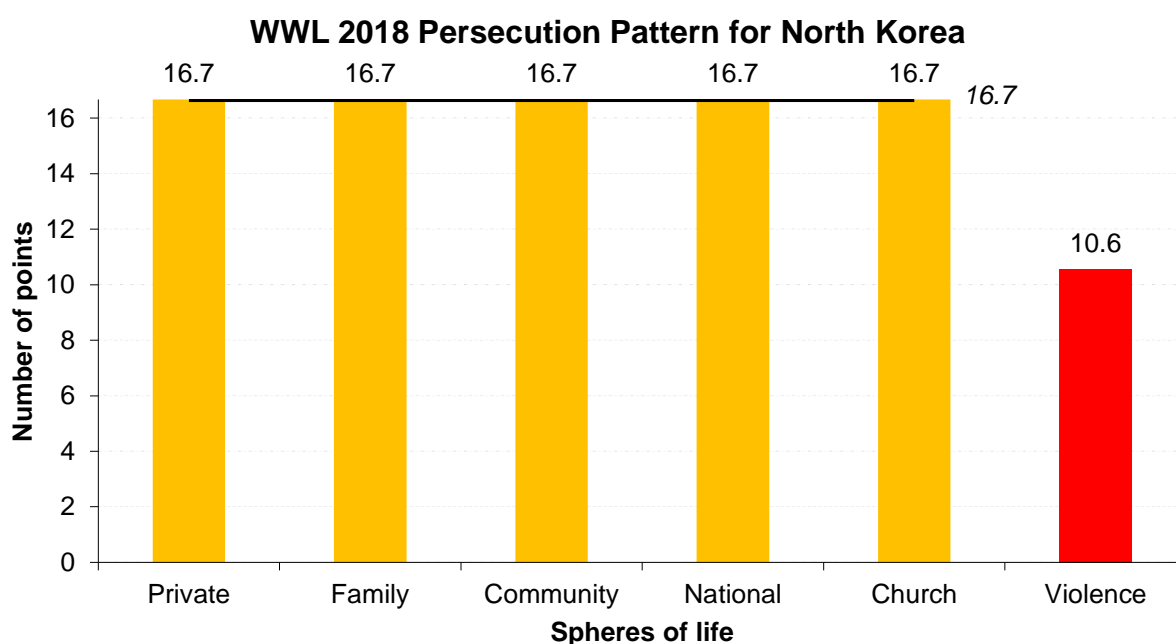
²⁴ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/defectors-05182017161546.html>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

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.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

These converts all come from a Communist or a Kim Il Sung/Kim Jong Il-background. Many of them are North Koreans who came to the Christian faith during the 1990s²⁵ when countless people crossed the border to China during the years of famine and found help in Chinese churches. After returning to North Korea, they remained true to their new-found faith.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern for North Korea shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in North Korea increased over almost all *Spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to be at an extreme level. It rose from a score of 16.4 in WWL 2017 to the maximum possible score of 16.7.
- All *Spheres of life* experience extreme pressure levels with maximum scores. This pattern reflects the reality of a state where *Dictatorial paranoia* is evident in every part

²⁵ Many also crossed the border after the year 2000, but not in such large numbers.

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 increased from 9.8 in WWL 2017 to 10.6 in WWL 2018, since not just homes of Christians have been raided, but also (road side) shops and businesses as well.

Private sphere:

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. Bibles and other materials are carefully hidden and only used when the believers are sure they are really alone. 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 highly dangerous, talking about one's faith to non-Christian family members (let alone to others) is virtually impossible. Family members are taught that their prime loyalty is to the Kim family. Since even children are willing to denounce their parents because of this high pressure to be loyal to the Kims and they are taught so (as reports continue to show), most parents do not even dare to tell their own children that they are Christians.

Family sphere:

The extreme-level score 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. In any case, men and women are very often separated, although some camps do have family barracks. Anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious activities will be subjected to discrimination, arrest, arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture, and/or public execution. Because of the high risks, it is impossible for Christian parents to teach their children according to their faith, for not only would it be dangerous, they would also have to work against the weekly indoctrination sessions, which even start in the nurseries. Celebrating Christian weddings, funerals or Communion service openly is out of the question, as is, of course, any public Christian baptism.

Community sphere:

Everyone is under strict social control as North Korea applies the old Communist method of neighborhood watch, 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 will pass unnoted. Children of Christians are usually not aware of their parents' faith, for most parents prefer to share their faith only when the children are older, if at all. But if they know about it, they have to be very careful not to reveal their faith for this will lead to immediate denunciation, not only of themselves, but of their whole family. Similar caution is necessary in the workplace and at home, especially in all self-criticism sessions, which have stepped up according to reports obtained, reflecting an increasing pressure from the state and reliance on ideology.

National sphere:

Everything is aligned with the ideologies of *Juche* and *Kimilsungism/KimJongllism* (as explained above). Media reporting against Christians is biased - if there are any reports at all - as state media refer to Christian missionaries as terrorists and regard Christianity as a threat to the state. Christians can never expect a fair trial when they have to appear in court. Even expatriate Christians will not get a fair trial when arrested by authorities. 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, primarily Bible verses, back with them to North Korea. Every defector caught and repatriated will have to answer a lot of questions. All reports confirm that these include questions like: “Did you meet any Christians in China?” and “Have you visited a church in China?” North Korean agents have been active on Chinese territory but there were a number of high-level defections in 2016. This is especially significant since these sort of defections increase state paranoia and make life for Christians and others in North Korea even more complicated and controlled. It already caused the regime to tighten its border security even further.

Church sphere:

Churches simply cannot exist. There are four government-controlled church buildings in Pyongyang which are used by the regime to show its international visitors that it grants freedom of religion. One of them is Roman Catholic, two are Protestant and one is Russian Orthodox. Those churches are not able to function as church congregations in the true sense of the word as they do not have any space to move beyond the limits set by the government. Outside of these “show-churches”, it is not possible to produce or import Christian materials legally or to set up any Christian organization. Legal training of leaders or youth work cannot be done 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 and it is difficult to obtain reports from the labor camps. Canadian-Korean pastor Hyeon Soo Lim was released from prison on 9 August 2017, after allegedly having confessed his guilt. Pastor Dong-cheol Kim, however, is still detained in North Korea. Two Korean-American Christians and lecturers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), Tony Kim and Hak-song Kim, were also arrested in April and May 2017 respectively. North Korea accused them of behavior opposing the regime. In a [change of its hiring policy](#),²⁶ PUST is reportedly now having to look for non-American staff.

Gender profile of persecution

No data currently available.

²⁶ See: <https://www.nknews.org/2017/10/pyongyang-university-no-longer-seeking-american-volunteers/?c=1508909752924>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

Future outlook

Persecution resulting from the engines of *Communist and Post-Communist oppression* blended with *Dictatorial paranoia* is fanned by a growing ideology of self-reliance and increasing isolation, as reflected in the continued series of rocket and nuclear weapon tests, as well as in the country's behavior towards its traditional ally China and the killing of Kim Jong Nam at a Malaysian airport.

The country's biggest challenge remains its relationship with China. It still depends heavily on China economically and cannot afford to be abandoned by it. China is increasingly unhappy with the regime's behavior but still has reasons to keep North Korea afloat. Those 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 regional stability, 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.

Despite having ruled the country for more than six years, Kim Jong Un did not travel to any foreign country until March 2018. According to tradition and as a matter of courtesy, he visited China first. This points to a warming relationship, which would be bad news for Christians, since China continues to repatriate every North Korean who manages to defect, despite having signed the United Nation's Refugee Convention and despite the fact that China could send all defectors to South Korea without any cost and effort.

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 Korean missionaries being expelled by [China](#).²⁷
- The increased activities of the North Korean government attempting to eliminate any possibility of spreading the Christian message.

Policy considerations

- Reports show that large numbers of Christians are held in labor camps. The international community should strongly denounce the existence of these labor camps and put pressure on the North Korean government to close them and to restore justice to the victims.
- Sanctions and international isolation have not stopped underground exports from North Korea to China and have resulted in greater tension with North Korea and a worsening situation for the population, including Christians. In the current context, China is wary of

²⁷ See: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/march/china-kicks-out-korean-missionaries-south-north-thaad-jilin.html>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

implementing sanctions, and the government is reducing space for negotiation in all areas, including religious freedom. Therefore, the international community should ensure cooperation and a common effort to engage in direct negotiation with the North Korean government and refrain from military pre-emptive approaches.

- The international community should work with countries allied to North Korea to put pressure on the government to release any imprisoned Christian foreigners.
- The Seoul UN field base and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea should request permission to carry out prison visits with a view to including the situation of Christian prisoners, in line with international law requirements to hold routine prison monitoring.
- The Seoul UN field base and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea might use their position to examine the persecution of Christians in North Korea to provide fuller reporting on the situation, to call on the regime to allow access to Christians held in forced labor camps and prisons and to call for their eventual release.
- China should stop the forced repatriation of North Korean refugees and uphold their full human rights, including access to housing, education and religious freedom.
- The international community should examine the human rights situation of North Korean refugees and fully investigate claims of human trafficking and slavery.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on North Korea available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on North Korea available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/north-korea/>

- [North Korean explains growing up under Kim dynasty, and how his perception of Christianity changed](#)
20 March 2018
Having been told throughout his childhood that Christianity was an evil and having held a genuine fear of any foreigner wearing a cross, John now wears a little cross himself.
- [New report finds 'flicker of hope' in North Korea](#)
7 February 2018
A new report on North Korea finds that over the last decade there has been a shift in people's attitudes away from being "passive recipients" serving the regime to being motivated "change-makers" shaping their own destiny.
- [Christmas in North Korea: an inner celebration](#)
26 December 2017
How will Christians under pressure for their faith celebrate Christmas? The third instalment in our series focuses on North Korea.
- [Family imprisoned, tortured for fleeing North Korea – and for their Christian faith](#)
30 August 2017
As North Korea's missile testing focuses the world's attention on Kim Jong-un's regime, one woman's story shows how harshly families are treated when they refuse to follow his authoritarian rules.
- [North Korea: freed pastor Hyeon Soo Lim welcomed home with 'joyful crying'](#)
16 August 2017
The large congregation of Light Korean Presbyterian Church in Toronto, Canada was ecstatic on Sunday (13 August) in welcoming home their Senior Pastor, Hyeon Soo Lim, held for more than two years of a life sentence in a North Korean labour camp.
- [North Korea frees Canadian church leader 'on sick bail'](#)
9 August 2017
Hyeon-soo Lim, the Korean Canadian church leader sentenced to life in prison with hard labour, has been freed today (9 August) "on sick bail", says a North Korean state news agency. He was convicted in December 2015 on numerous charges, including an attempt to overthrow the government.
- [Anger and tears as Otto 'completes his journey home'](#)
20 June 2017
The family of 22-year-old Otto Warmbier confirmed his death yesterday (19 June), just a week after he was released, in a coma, from 15 months' detention in North Korea.
- [Escaped North Korean risks her life to visit Christian family she left behind](#)
3 April 2017
It was a shock to Myoung-Hee* when she discovered that most of her family were Christians.

Recent country developments

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

- [North Korea: Kim visits China before facing further high level talks](#)
18 April 2018
According to Reuters reporting on 8 March 2018, US President Trump declared he is ready for direct talks with North Korea under certain conditions.
- [North Korea: PUST widens its search for volunteer staff](#)
4 December 2017
Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) has had to change its hiring policy due to political circumstances.
- [North Korea: Family business as usual – but with increasing isolation](#)
9 November 2017
Kim Jong Un has promoted his sister to the Party’s politburo, allowing her to become part of the country’s ruling elite.
- [North Korea: Regime looks for ways to survive as sanctions bite](#)
25 October 2017
After its series of nuclear and missile tests and the subsequent sanctions issued by the United Nations, North Korea is looking for help.
- [North Korea: UN sanctions begin to bite](#)
4 October 2017
In particular North Korean workers in Russia are feeling the restrictions caused by the UN Security Council’s international sanctions.
- [North Korea: Drought has drastic consequences](#)
24 August 2017
The UN food agency has warned that due to exceptionally dry weather conditions in April-June, this year’s crops are expected to be very poor.
- [North Korea: Not as backward as the West would like to think](#)
31 July 2017
The North Korean government is targeting users of Chinese-made mobile phones, since these might be being used to contact defectors.
- [North Korea: Increased monitoring of electronic devices](#)
14 June 2017
Electronic devices which foreigners bring into the country are being increasingly targeted for hacking.

- [North Korea: Costs soar for defectors](#)

29 May 2017

Sources in the NK/China border region say that the prices brokers charge to North Koreans seeking to enter China illegally have “skyrocketed” in the last months. Whereas the price at the end of 2016 averaged \$8,900 per defector, charges have been as high as \$16,000 this year.

- [North Korea: Gathering “pawns” and losing an ally?](#)

14 May 2017

As Reuters reported on 7 May 2017, North Korea has arrested another US-American citizen, bringing the total number of US citizens in detention to four.

- [North Korea: UNHRC resolution and USA-China summit likely to spark fierce response](#)

11 April 2017

The UN has appealed for humanitarian aid to be provided for suffering North Korean citizens. However, ideological rough roads are to be expected, especially since the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a resolution investigating and recording human rights violations in North Korea for later prosecution.

- [China/North Korea: Coal import ban goes beyond UN sanctions](#)

13 March 2017

Just a few days after Kim Jong Nam’s assassination, China announced a total ban on coal imported from North Korea for the rest of the year.

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