

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

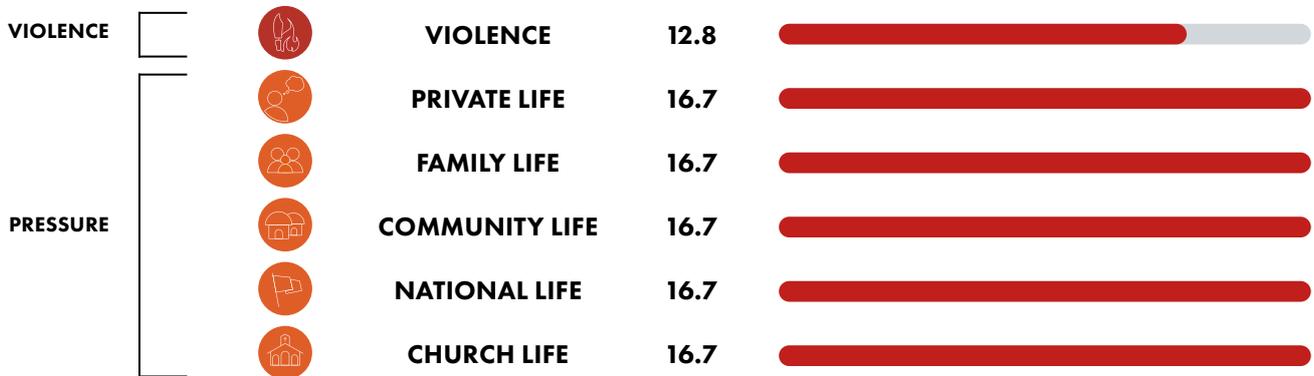
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO. **1**

## NORTH KOREA



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

### Key findings

There is no freedom of religion or belief in North Korea. The regime keeps a watchful eye on all citizens. If Christians are discovered, they and their families are deported to labor camps as political criminals or killed on the spot. Gathering with other Christians is therefore almost impossible and must only be attempted in the utmost secrecy. “The worship of the leaders became ever more important over the years and, with its constant indoctrination, warnings about “superstitions” and religions (without naming them as such) became more important as well (USCIRF, “[Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience in North Korea](#)”, 29 July 2022). The “[anti-reactionary thought law](#)”, enacted in 2020, included the Bible among the banned books mentioned in Article 28, showing that Christianity is still seen by the state as a grave danger. The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

State Affairs Commission  
President Kim Jong Un

### POPULATION

26,090,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

400,000 (OD estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Agnosticism

### GOVERNMENT

Single-Party Dictatorship



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	400,000	1.5
Agnostics	15,003,272	57.5
Atheists	3,915,143	15.0
Others	3,284,826	12.6

Source<sup>1</sup>

In 1907 the Great Pyongyang Revival began, and the capital of North Korea became known as the “Jerusalem of the East”. Hundreds of churches sprang up and missionaries set up educational institutions throughout the country. Under Japanese rule the Church was increasingly persecuted. After the defeat of Japan 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, in the aftermath, tens of thousands of Christians were killed, imprisoned or banished to remote areas. The rest of the Church went underground. It is estimated that before the Korean War, there were more than 300,000 Christians in North Korea. Just 10 years later, there was no visible presence of them anymore.

Kimilsungism (worship of the ruling family) is the prescribed national religion. All citizens must attend weekly self-criticism sessions and memorize more

than 100 pages of ideological material. Influenced by Confucianism, North Korea developed a social classification system called Songbun, under which every citizen is divided into three classes; the core (28% of society), the wavering (45%) and the hostile (27%). Christians and their descendants are classed as hostile. Christianity is seen as a dangerous foreign religion that must be fought against. Open Doors estimates that tens of thousands of Christians are in labor camps. A 2020 UN report highlighted human rights violations against women in these camps, which include sexual violence, forced nudity, rape and forced abortion. Christian men also experience physical violence and maltreatment in labor camps.

No reliable data showing religious statistics is available. Open Doors estimates the number of Christians at 400,000, but it could be as high as 500,000. WCD data (accessed March 2023) A South Korean archbishop claimed in a recently published book that the Catholic Church [is growing](#) despite being underground and persecuted (UCA News, 17 May 2022). There are followers of Buddhism and Confucianism, whose philosophies are easy to follow internally without anyone noticing.

Kim Jong Un, in power since 2011, controls the parliament, government and military. He wants North Korea to be taken seriously and has worked to advance its rocket and nuclear technology, as well as embarking on a diplomatic offensive, meeting with the South Korean, Russian, Chinese and United States (US) presidents. In a long-anticipated move,

<sup>1</sup> Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

North Korea declared itself a “[nuclear weapons state](#)” in September 2022 (BBC News, 9 September 2022). Economically, North Korea is struggling under international sanctions, but the regime denies direct access to its citizens in need. Greater cooperation between the North Korean intelligence agency and Chinese police has resulted in increasing numbers of defectors, usually women, being identified and forcibly repatriated. [Facial recognition technology](#) in China has also made this easier.

## How the situation varies by region

The various [prison camps and total control zones](#) can be seen as areas where Christians are facing the most difficulties (US State Department, March 2019), but it is not easy to obtain up-to-date details.

## Who is affected?

### [Communities of expatriate Christians](#)

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### [Historical Christian communities](#)

The Christians in this category are those who were living in the country before the Korean War (1950-1953) and their descendants. While many Christians either died in the war, fled to the South or were banished to isolated villages, a small percentage of the historical Christian communities was able to hide their faith and form an underground church. Due to the guilt-by-association principle, the descendants of known Christians face insurmountable social obstacles and are watched with suspicion.

### [Converts to Christianity](#)

These converts come from a Communist or “Kimilsungism” background. Many of them became Christians during the famine of the 1990s when many people crossed the border to China and found help in Chinese churches. After returning to North Korea, they retained their new-found faith and shared it with trusted others (Associated Press, 5 April 2018).

### [Non-traditional Christian communities](#)

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### [Communist and post-Communist oppression](#)

Although North Korea is dominated by the personality cult of its leaders, it is still run according to Communist customs and societal control. Religion is seen as dangerous and Christians are part of the hostile class, according to Songbun (the country’s social stratification system).

### [Dictatorial paranoia](#)

Kim Jong Un has amended the national oath to shorten references to his father’s and grandfather’s achievements and give extra emphasis to his own. On several occasions in 2020, Kim Jong Un failed to acknowledge his father or grandfather and did not visit their ‘shrines’ on the Day of the Sun, the highest celebration in the country’s calendar. This shows how much he has consolidated his power.

The above sources operate so closely together that they almost blend into one. The main perpetrators of both are government officials and the Workers’ Party of Korea, followed by citizens and extended family. The highest goal of the authorities is the survival of the country and its leader. As for citizens, neighbors are on the lookout for any suspicious behavior to report to the authorities.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Uncounted numbers of North Korean Christians are in labor camps for their faith, where female prisoners suffer from sexual violence and rape. Many defectors are women, and North Korean women who defect to China are at risk of human trafficking. During the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean repatriations were temporarily brought to a halt but have since resumed. Repatriated female defectors and prisoners remain highly vulnerable to sexual violence during the interrogation process, as well as the ongoing practice of forced abortions.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Imprisonment by government
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

### Men

The patriarchal society of North Korea means that state monitoring of the population is especially focused on the male heads of 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. Those with an identifiable Christian connection are consigned to the lowest positions in the military (military service is 10 years for men), in universities and workplaces, and they are denied Party membership. Men also suffer maltreatment and physical abuse within labor camps.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – physical



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	1	96
2023	1	98
2022	2	96
2021	1	94
2020	1	94

From WWL 2002 to WWL 2021, North Korea has consistently ranked No. 1. In WWL 2023, it returned to the top after a hiatus in WWL 2022 when the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan led to an unprecedented spike in persecution. North Korea retains its spot at the top in WWL 2024 as the pressure in all Spheres of Life remains at the maximum level and no change has been observed. With the new 'Anti-reactionary thought law', Christians continued to be arrested and brought to labor camps. The violence score decreased minimally, but this should not be mistaken for an improving situation, but rather as a proof for the challenges of obtaining reports: the widely reported arrest of a family of Christians illustrates that the price of being a Christian in North Korea is still high.



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

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### Private life

Police and intelligence agents search homes without warning. If they find Christian materials, it is considered a crime against the nation, and the whole family can be banished, imprisoned, or executed. Those who use an unregistered smartphone or radio to access unapproved media are punished. Christians only dare to listen to radio programs at night, hidden under blankets. Each act of worship, even though conducted by oneself, is perceived as an “act of extreme disloyalty”, as one country expert says. Citizens are trained to report anyone who might be an enemy of the regime, including family members. Teachers encourage pupils to denounce their parents if they see them behaving contrary to what they have learned. Because of this danger, Christian parents often wait until their children are teenagers before speaking to them about their faith.

### Family life

Baptisms cannot be openly conducted because doing so would result in imprisonment or execution. As we saw in Private Life, sharing faith with one’s children is very risky. Christians will try to share Bible stories disguised as fairy tales. Some North Korean refugees have told us that when a Christian is exposed, if a non-Christian spouse has high-ranking parents, they may attempt to forcibly divorce the couple and eliminate all records of the relationship. Otherwise, the whole family is interrogated and imprisoned due to the guilt-by-association principle. Kimilsungism is the most important subject from nursery to university. Even in a Ph.D. curriculum for a subject such as Nuclear Physics, 30% of the coursework involves the study of Juche ideology. Christianity is portrayed as a subversive ideology from American imperialists; Christians are viewed as traitors to the nation and spies. As one country expert said, “Children and youth naturally hate Christianity and Christians, as they have learned from school from early on”.

### Community life

North Korea applies *inminban*, the Communist neighborhood watch system. All that happens within a housing unit will be reported to the authorities. Random interrogation by the police or Secret Service is common for all citizens. One of its purposes is to discover Christians, who are



then executed or sent to prison camps or remote mountain areas, as they committed a political crime. 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. Those with Christian relatives are closely monitored and prevented from accessing good schools, universities, the army, and the Workers’ Party. All North Koreans must bow to statues on the way to and from work or school and participate in practices such as self-criticism sessions and national ceremonies.

### National life

The new anti-reactionary thought law together with Article 68 of the Constitution states that citizens “have freedom of religious beliefs” but that “no one may use religion as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State and social order.” More important than the constitution for the functioning of the state are the 10 Principles of Monolithic Ideology statutes of the Workers’ Party. These are the governing principles of the NK government and society. Based on the 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). The national media broadcast anti-Christian content, where Christians are portrayed as evil betrayers of the nation and missionary activities are referred to as “acts of terrorism”. As one expert said: “All North Korean media are under government control. They demonize Christians as robbers, swindlers, spies of the American enemy 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 manner.” Christians are arbitrarily arrested and punished without trial. Even foreign Christians who have faced court proceedings have been deprived of equal treatment and held in prolonged arbitrary detention.

### Church life

All church activities are illegal in North Korea except for the services held in Pyongyang’s official churches, which are attended by tourists as “evidence” of North Korea’s freedom of religion. There have been cases where underground church groups were discovered and Christians were sent to camps or killed. Details cannot be published for security reasons. The regime is especially interested in finding leaders, punishing them and interrogating them about the rest of the network. Tourists entering

and leaving North Korea have their luggage checked to make sure they only bring in one Bible for personal use and that they do not leave it there (although there have not been many tourists to North Korea in the reporting period to begin with). Import and production of Christian material is banned. According to the 2021 North Korean Human Rights White Paper of the Korean Institution of National Unification (KINU), public executions are becoming more frequent just for possessing a Bible. Distribution of Bibles is more harshly punished than possession. North Koreans cannot leave the country without government permission, which means attending conferences or meeting other Christians abroad cannot happen.

## International obligations & rights violated

**North Korea has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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 into 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)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Although worship of the North Korean leadership in theory leaves no room for religion, followers of Buddhism and Confucianism are known to exist. However, these religions belong to the Asian cultural mindset and can be followed privately.

‘Superstitious activity’ (understood to mean fortune-telling) is banned. However, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have reported an increase in this, for example before planning a wedding or making a business deal.

There have also been reports of rights violations against Falun Gong followers.

### Open Doors in North Korea

The scope of work focused on in North Korea includes the following:

- Supplying persecuted North Korean believers through its networks in China with emergency relief aid (food, medicines, clothes, etc.).
- Training through radio broadcasting.
- Providing shelter, training and training materials to North Korean believers in China (who often travel back to North Korea)



#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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