

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

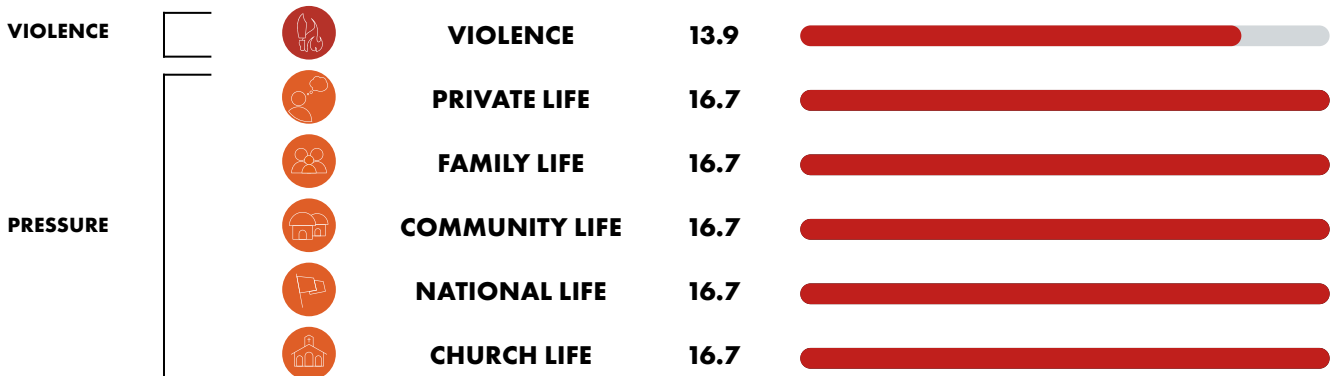
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

NORTH KOREA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO. **1**



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 ([CSW, 11 September 2024](#)). The regime keeps a watchful eye on all its citizens. If Christians are discovered, they and their families are deported to labor camps as political criminals or killed on the spot. Christians do not have any place in society. Gathering with other Christians is therefore almost impossible and can only be attempted in the utmost secrecy. The 2020 “Anti-Reactionary Thought Law” banned the Bible in Article 28, highlighting the state’s view of Christianity as a grave threat. (Daily NK, 15 December 2020). The churches in Pyongyang that are shown to foreign visitors are state-controlled and primarily serve to project an image of religious freedom and serve mere propaganda purposes.

Quick facts

LEADER

Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un

POPULATION

26,320,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

400,000 (Open Doors estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Atheist

GOVERNMENT

Single-party Communist state



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Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	400,000	1.5
Agnostics/Atheists	18,953,500	72.0
Ethnic religionists	3,194,000	12.1
Others	3,772,500	14.4
	Total	100%

Source¹

In the early 1900s, 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 regime. During the Korean War (1950-53) many Christians fled to South Korea. After the war had ended, the regime began a strong political campaign against Christians. Tens of thousands of Christians were killed, imprisoned or banished to remote areas and the rest of the Church went underground.

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 has 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.

Kim Jong-un, in power since 2011, controls parliament, government and military. He wants North Korea to be taken seriously and has worked to advance its rocket and nuclear technology. In a long-anticipated move, North Korea declared itself a “nuclear weapons state” in September 2022 ([BBC News, 9 September 2022](#)). There is an increased reverence to Kim Jong-un amongst North Koreans, almost at par with his father and grandfather. Economically, North Korea is struggling under international sanctions, and the regime denies direct access to its citizens in need. However, Russia’s war against Ukraine provided a much-needed lifeline to the regime, as North Korea sends munition, troops and workers against grain, cash and political protection. 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 ([RFA, 22 June 2023](#)).

¹ Other refers to “all the rest” to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025 – adapted to incorporate OD-estimate

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.

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 since 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. He also decided to drop the Juche calendar system his father and grandfather introduced and followed ([NK News, 17 October 2024](#)). This shows how much he has consolidated his power.

The above sources of persecution 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 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, but it is not easy to obtain up-to-date details ([US State Department, Prisons of North Korea, March 2019](#)).

Who is affected?

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Historical Christian communities are those who were living in the country before the Korean War (1950-1953) and their descendants. While many Christians died in the war, fled to the South or were banished to isolated villages, a small percentage were 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

Converts to Christianity come from a Communist or "Kimilsungism" background. Many 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](#)).



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Repatriated female defectors face forced abortions and brutal treatment by border guards. At least 80% of escapees are women, many trafficked in China, raped, sold into sexual slavery, or forced into “marriages.” Fear of repatriation drives some to carry poison to avoid returning to prison camps. Tens of thousands of Christians are imprisoned in North Korea, with women suffering rape, sexual violence, and torture in camps and interrogations. Authorities deliberately use sexual abuse to humiliate believers in the country’s shame-based culture, causing trauma and isolation.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

In North Korea’s patriarchal system, state monitoring is especially focused on male heads of household. All men must work in state-assigned jobs, making escape difficult. Christians are placed at the bottom of the *songbun* status system, and its three-generation rule is applied harshly to men and boys, punishing sons more severely,. Suspected believers are sent to the prison camps, facing torture and death or forced to do hard labor in remote mines, logging, sawmills and other places.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	1	97
2025	1	98
2024	1	96
2023	1	98
2022	2	96

As in recent reporting periods, pressure has scored the maximum possible in all spheres of life. This reflects the reality of a state where the Persecution engine and Dictatorial paranoia is evident in every segment of society. The violence score dropped, however, from 14.4 points in WWL 2025 to 13.9. This was due to a lower number of police raids against Christians and church groups. It has to be kept in mind how difficult it is to obtain reports from the labor camps and this does not mean an improvement for the situation of Christians in the country. That for the North Korean regime new strategic options opened as the country is needed as provider of arms and of military personnel by Russia for the Ukraine War, has emboldened the leaders ([Foreign Affairs, 18 December 2024](#)), even though it brings challenges in controlling news and information as well. However, this should not be confused with an improvement in living for the ordinary citizen ([East Asia Forum, 13 February 2025](#)), let alone Christians.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no specific details of violence against Christians can be published.

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PRIVATE LIFE

Police and intelligence agents raid homes without warning, treating possession of Christian materials as a crime against the nation that can lead to banishment, imprisonment, or execution. Christians secretly listen to jammed radio broadcasts at night, while worship is deemed an “act of extreme disloyalty,” and citizens are urged to report even family members.

FAMILY LIFE

Open baptisms are impossible, as they risk imprisonment or execution. Christians sometimes share Bible stories with their children disguised as fairy tales, but only when they believe the children are mature enough, since schoolteachers question them about faith and encourage them to report their families. Kimilsungism is the most important subject from nursery to university. Christianity is portrayed as a subversive ideology by American imperialists; Christians are viewed as traitors to the nation and spies. Indoctrination starts from kindergarten ([DailyNK, 27 March 2025](#)). In March 2025, the country held its first national training event for children’s union instructors. They were taught how to make sure children learn and follow the state’s ideology ([NK News, 31 March 2025](#)).

COMMUNITY LIFE

North Korea applies *inminban*, the Communist neighborhood watch system. In March 2025, North Korean authorities gathered the heads of neighborhood watch units for the first time since 2007, in an effort to strengthen ideological resolve and control ([NK News, 18 March 2025](#)). Random police and Secret Service interrogations are common, with the State Security Agency prioritizing the identification of hidden Christians through surveillance, phone tapping, planted devices, and even fake converts. Those with Christian relatives are closely monitored and prevented from accessing good schools, universities, the army, and the Workers’ Party.

NATIONAL LIFE

The Anti-Reactionary Thought Law and Article 68 of the Constitution nominally grant religious freedom but restricts it to protect state order. More significant are the Workers’ Party’s 10 Principles, enforcing loyalty



to the Kim family. North Korea’s “Juche” ideology functions as a quasi-religion, where the leader’s or his family’s proclamations cannot be questioned without severe punishment. State media depicts Christians as traitors and Christian missionaries as “terrorists,” while government channels portray them as criminals and spies. Christians risk arrest without trial, and foreigners face prolonged detention and unfair trials.

CHURCH LIFE

All church activities are banned in North Korea except tourist services in Pyongyang’s state-run churches, described by experts as regime “props.” Even anonymous contributions to foreign publications can lead to punishment. The regime is especially interested in finding Christian leaders, punishing them and interrogating them about the rest of their networks. The [2021 North Korean Human Rights White Paper](#) reported that public executions had become more frequent just for possessing a Bible.

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

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 North Korea](#)), 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, exorcism, use of talismans, use of birth charts, and tarot cards. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against such practices.



Open Doors in North Korea

Open Doors' work on North Korea includes:

- Supplying persecuted North Korean believers through its networks in third countries with emergency relief aid (food, medicines, clothes, etc.)
- Training through radio broadcasting
- Providing shelter, training and training materials to North Korean believers in third countries



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.