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## North Korea

**Country:**

[North Korea](#)

**Year:**

2014

**FIW Status:**

NF

**PR Rating:**

7

**CL Rating:**

7

**Aggregate Score:**

3

**Combined Freedom Score:**

7.0

**Overview:**

In January 2013, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to impose new sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and to reiterate its commitment to enforce previous resolutions. The move followed the launch of a rocket into orbit by the DPRK the previous month. On February 12, North Korea conducted an underground nuclear weapons test, its third since 2006. The test fueled international protest and was followed by escalating threats by the DPRK, especially targeted at the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. In March, the Security Council unanimously adopted another resolution, the fifth since 2006, condemning North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program. The resolution imposed additional financial sanctions on North Korea, and called on states to step up inspections and interdictions of DPRK-affiliated shipments.

In April 2013, North Korea announced a new plan for the simultaneous development of its nuclear weapons and the economy (commonly referred to as the "byungjin line"). Satellite imagery throughout the year showed active construction at North Korea's two missile test sites, including possible new launch pads, improved roads, and more permanent instrumentation facilities, as well as additional tunneling activity at its nuclear test site. Major developments at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center were also noted. Various other instances of progress toward creating a nuclear weapon were seen during the year.

In June 2013, North Korea established the State Economic Development Committee (also

referred to as Chosun Economic Development Committee), a “non-state” institution that was created for the purpose of developing special economic zones (SEZs). Plans include development of 14 SEZs, a considerable increase over the four that currently are under development. In July, the ruling Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) created a centralized economy department with branches in each province.

These plans, however, exist outside the realm of the joint North-South Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). The KIC, which has in the past outlasted political disputes between the two Koreas, was shut down in April 2013 in response to high tensions on the peninsula. After six rounds of talks, an agreement was reached in August to reopen the complex, which included provisions to prevent unilateral actions to help avoid future shutdowns.

In July, a newly established Commission of Inquiry (COI), created by the UN Human Rights Council, began operations. The COI was tasked with investigating and evaluating North Korea’s “systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights.” In September, COI chair Michael Kirby reported that the commission had found evidence of large-scale patterns that may constitute systematic and gross human rights violations. However, he also noted instances of “hope,” including the DPRK’s signing of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The COI final report is scheduled to be issued in March 2014, including findings and recommendations for North Korea and the international community on how to improve the situation of human rights in the DPRK.

In December, North Korea publicly purged Kim Jong-un’s uncle and vice-chairman of the National Defense Commission, Jang Song-thaek. During the December 8 KWP Central Committee Politburo meeting, Jang was arrested and removed from all posts and his arrest was broadcasted on KCTV. On December 13, the KCNA reported that Jang was tried for treason before a military tribunal on December 12 and was immediately executed.

## **Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

**Political Rights: 0 / 40 [Key]**

### **A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12**

Kim Jong-il led the DPRK following the 1994 death of his father, Kim Il-sung, to whom the office of president was permanently dedicated in a 1998 constitutional revision. Kim Jong-il’s son, Kim Jong-un, became the country’s new supreme leader after his father’s death in December 2011. Kim Jong-un’s titles include “first secretary” of the KWP, “first chairman” of the National Defence Commission (NDC), and “supreme commander” of the KPA. North Korea’s parliament, the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA), is a rubber-stamp institution elected to five-year terms. All candidates for office, who run unopposed, are preselected by the ruling Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) and two subordinate minor parties.

### **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16**

North Korea functions as a single-party state under a totalitarian family dictatorship. The KWP, which was founded in 1926 and led by Kim Il-sung, is the only legally permitted party.

Kim Jong-un currently serves as the “first secretary” of the KWP, with Kim Jong-il as the “eternal general secretary.”

### **C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12**

Corruption is believed to be endemic at every level of the state and economy, and bribery is pervasive. North Korea was ranked 175 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International’s 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

#### **Civil Liberties: 3 / 60**

### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 0 / 16**

All domestic media outlets are run by the state. Televisions and radios are permanently fixed to state channels, and all publications are subject to strict supervision and censorship. In January 2012, the Associated Press opened a bureau office in Pyongyang. Since then, foreign media have been allowed limited access to key political events.

Internet access is restricted to a few thousand people, and foreign websites are blocked. The black market provides alternative information sources, including cellular telephones, pirated recordings of South Korean dramas, and radios capable of receiving foreign programs. Cellular phone service was launched in December 2008 by Koryolink, a joint venture between Egypt’s Orascom and North Korea’s Korea Post and Telecommunications Corporation. The network is limited to domestic use only, with foreign residents using a separate network. In May 2013, Koryolink reached two million subscriptions; however, the actual number of users may be notably less. Since January 2013, foreigners have been allowed to bring cell phones and smartphones into the country, enabling live social media feeds out of North Korea.

Although freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution, it does not exist in practice. State-sanctioned churches maintain a token presence in Pyongyang, and some North Koreans who live near the Chinese border are known to practice their faiths furtively. However, intense state indoctrination and repression preclude free exercise of religion. Nearly all forms of private communication are monitored by a huge network of informers.

There is no academic freedom. All curriculum must be approved by the state, including domestically based foreigner-led educational opportunities. Although some North Koreans are permitted to study abroad—at both universities and short-term educational training programs—these opportunities are also subject to crackdowns. In October 2013, Pyongyang reportedly ordered its diplomats and state trading company officials to return their children to North Korea from educational institutions abroad out of concern that they could undermine the regime by spreading information or defecting.

### **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12**

Freedom of assembly is not recognized, and there are no known associations or

organizations other than those created by the state. Strikes, collective bargaining, and other organized-labor activities are illegal.

## **F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16**

North Korea does not have an independent judiciary. The UN General Assembly has recognized and condemned severe DPRK human rights violations, including torture, public executions, extrajudicial and arbitrary detention, and forced labor; the absence of due process and the rule of law; and death sentences for political offenses. Updated South Korean reports estimate that there are 80,000–120,000 political prisoners held in detention camps in the country. This figure is lower than in past years due to the closing of two camps, the expansion of at least two other facilities, and the high mortality rates inside the camps. Inmates face brutal conditions, and collective or familial punishment for suspected dissent by an individual is a common practice.

In November 2012, U.S. citizen Kenneth Bae was arrested in North Korea and prosecuted for crimes against the state, including planning a religious coup and encouraging North Koreans to bring down the government. Bae was sentenced in April 2013 to 15 years of hard labor. While his mother has been allowed to visit him, the U.S. government has been unsuccessful in negotiating his release. In October 2013, 85-year-old Merrill Newman, another U.S. citizen, was detained while touring North Korea. Newman, who was removed from his plane just before its departure, released a videotaped confession in which he apologized for hostile acts committed against North Korea during the 1950–53 Korean War. He was released and returned to the United States in December, and stated that his confession had been coerced.

The government operates a semihereditary system of social discrimination whereby all citizens are classified into 53 subgroups under overall security ratings—“core,” “wavering,” and “hostile”—based on their family’s perceived loyalty to the regime. This rating determines virtually every facet of a person’s life, including employment and educational opportunities, place of residence, access to medical facilities, and even access to stores.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16**

There is no freedom of movement, and forced internal resettlement is routine. Access to Pyongyang is tightly restricted; the availability of food, housing, and health care is somewhat better in the capital than in the rest of the country. Recently, this disparity has increased, with the capital featuring more luxuries for a growing middle class. Emigration is illegal, but many North Koreans have escaped via China or engaged in cross-border trade. Ignoring international objections, the Chinese government continues to return refugees and defectors to North Korea, where they are subject to torture, harsh imprisonment, or execution.

The economy remains both centrally planned and grossly mismanaged. Development is also hobbled by a lack of infrastructure, a scarcity of energy and raw materials, an inability to borrow on world markets or from multilateral banks because of sanctions, lingering foreign debt, and ideological isolationism. However, the growth of the black market has provided many North Koreans with a field of activity that is largely free from government control and continues to grow.

There have been widespread reports of trafficked women and girls among the tens of thousands of North Koreans who have recently crossed into China. UN bodies have noted the use of forced abortions and infanticide against pregnant women who are forcibly repatriated from China. Recent reports also suggest that prostitution of children continues unabated in North Korea and that the country's deteriorating economy has led to an increase in prostitution, which is now rampant in ordinary residential areas.

**Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)****X = Score Received****Y = Best Possible Score****Z = Change from Previous Year****Full Methodology****Source URL:** <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/north-korea>