

North Korea

Population: 23,100,000

Capital: Pyongyang

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

Status: Not Free

Overview:

After the short-lived “Joint Agreement” at the September 2005 session of the Six Party Talks on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, the country withdrew late that year from the Beijing-based talks in order to protest banking sanctions instigated by the U.S. Treasury Department in response to North Korea’s currency counterfeiting transgressions. North Korea in 2006 proceeded to test ballistic missiles and a nuclear device, both of which resulted in condemnatory resolutions from the UN Security Council. Also in 2006, the UN General Assembly joined the UN Commission on Human Rights (now the Human Rights Council) in recognizing and condemning North Korea’s severe human rights violations. Food shortages within North Korea and the problems faced by North Korean refugees in China continued to fester during the year.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established in the northern part of the Korea Peninsula in 1948 following three years of post–World War II Soviet occupation. The Soviet Union installed Kim Il-sung, a Korean resistance fighter who had waged guerrilla war against Japan, as the new country’s leader. In 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea in an attempt to reunify the peninsula under Communist rule. Drawing in the United States and then China, the ensuing three-year conflict killed at least 2.5 million people and ended with a cease-fire rather than a full peace treaty. Since then, the two Koreas have been on a continuous war footing, and the border remains one of the most heavily militarized places in the world.

Kim Il-sung solidified his control following the Korean War, purging rivals, throwing thousands of political prisoners into labor camps, and fostering an extreme personality cult that promoted him as North Korea’s messianic, superhuman “Great Leader.” Following the 1953 death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, “revisionist” Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe eased some of the worst excesses of Stalinism, but East Asian Communist governments took a different course. Kim Il-sung attempted to “Koreanize”

Stalinism by reviving the essentially feudalistic social and political institutions of the Choson dynasty, which had ruled Korea for 500 years before the advent of Japanese colonial rule in 1910. These included self-isolation, a hereditary class structure, extensive slave-labor, metaphysical Neo-Confucianism, emperor worship, monolithic ideological orthodoxy, guilt by association, collective punishment for political dissent, and dynastic succession. The DPRK's "Juche ideology" (often literally translated as self-reliance but better understood as "to do for oneself on one's own terms") as elaborated by Kim Il-sung's son, Kim Jong-il, replaced Marxism while seeking to raise collectivism to new levels. Rule passed to "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il upon the death of the "Great Leader" in 1994; Kim Il-sung was proclaimed "Eternal President" even though physically deceased.

The end of the Cold War and its associated Soviet and Chinese subsidies, however, led to the collapse of North Korea's command economy. While the regime maintained rigid control over all aspects of its citizens' lives, severe economic mismanagement resulted in a famine in the 1990s that killed at least a million people. In addition, as many as 300,000 North Koreans fled to China in search of food or wages to assist their families at home, despite a legal ban on leaving the DPRK. In 1995 North Korea ended its self-imposed isolation and allowed the United Nations and private humanitarian aid organizations from Europe, North America, and South Korea to undertake what was, at that point, one of the world's largest famine relief operations.

During the height of the famine crisis, when the Public Distribution System had collapsed, the DPRK reluctantly permitted food to be sold in public markets, which previously were regarded as illegal. The regime also instituted economic reforms in 2002, which included easing price controls, raising wages, devaluing the currency, and giving factory managers more autonomy. Despite continuing food shortages, the DPRK in 2005 instructed the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to either switch from humanitarian relief to development assistance or leave North Korea. However, the WFP remained in North Korea on a reduced basis. In 2006, the DPRK ordered Europe-based private humanitarian agencies to leave after the European Union sponsored UN resolutions condemning North Korea's human rights violations. Also in 2006, the regime attempted to revive the Public Distribution System and again prohibited grain sales in markets. There is little expectation of additional far-reaching market reforms, as the government seems opposed to any measures that would grant North Koreans greater personal autonomy and potentially undermine the dictatorship's tight grip on power. Human rights and humanitarian aid organizations warn of ongoing malnutrition and the threat of renewed famine.

Kim Jong-il's regime is kept afloat by Chinese and South Korean aid, as both neighbors fear the possible consequences of state collapse in North Korea, including a humanitarian disaster, massive refugee outflows, the release

of more than a million armed men from any military command structure, the emergence of criminal gangs and regional warlords, and a loss of state control over nuclear weapons.

Tensions relating to North Korea's nuclear weapons program have continued to define its foreign relations. Following disputes between the United States and the DPRK over the interpretation of the September 19, 2005 "joint statement," North Korea withdrew from the Beijing-based "Six Party Talks" on the issue in order to protest banking sanctions instigated by the U.S. Treasury Department, which was seeking to thwart North Korean counterfeiting activities. In July 2006 North Korea tested seven multistage ballistic missiles, which led to a unanimous UN Security Council resolution of condemnation. In October, the DPRK tested an atomic device, prompting another Security Council condemnation and an extension of previously imposed arms embargoes. Efforts continued at year's end to persuade North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

North Korea is not an electoral democracy. Every aspect of social, political, and economic life is tightly controlled by the state. The regime denies North Koreans all basic rights and subjects many thousands of political prisoners to brutal conditions. Collective punishment—the imprisonment of an entire family if one member of the family is suspected of dissent—is also a common practice. The government operates a highly developed, semihereditary system of social discrimination. All citizens are classified into 53 subgroups organized under overall security ratings—"core," "wavering," and "hostile"—based on their family's perceived loyalty to the regime. This rating essentially determines every facet of a person's life, including employment and educational opportunities, place of residence, access to medical facilities, and even access to stores.

Kim Jong-il has led North Korea since the 1994 death of his father, founding leader Kim Il-sung. He is formally the general secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, supreme commander of North Korea's military, and chairman of the National Defense Commission. This last post has been the "highest office of state" since the office of president was permanently dedicated to Kim Il-sung in a 1998 constitutional revision.

North Korea's parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly, is a rubber-stamp institution and meets for only a few days each year. Parliamentary and local assembly elections were held in 1990, 1998, and, most recently, in August 2004. The elections were not free. The government maintains two minority parties for the sake of appearances, but they do not fulfill any real electoral role, and are not known to exist below the "central committee" level.

North Korea was not ranked by Transparency International in its 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press, but in practice these rights are nonexistent. All media outlets—print, television, and radio—are either run or controlled by the state. Televisions and radios are permanently fixed to state channels, and all publications are subject to strict supervision and censorship. Internet access in North Korea is restricted to a few thousand people who have received state approval; foreign-based websites are blocked by the state.

Although freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution, it does not exist in practice. A report issued in late 2005 by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom details the severe violation of freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, and belief in the DPRK, and the intense political and ideological indoctrination to which North Koreans are subjected under Kimilsungism, a virtual state religion.

There are no known associations or organizations other than those created by the government. Strikes, collective bargaining, and other basic organized-labor activities are illegal.

In 2004 the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in North Korea to prepare studies for the commission (now the Human Rights Council) and the General Assembly. The DPRK refuses to cooperate with the special rapporteur. Nonetheless, his reports highlight problems in six areas: (1) the right to food and the right to life; (2) the right to the security of the person, humane treatment, nondiscrimination and access to justice; (3) the right to freedom of movement and the protection of persons linked with displacement (primarily in China and upon return to North Korea); (4) the right to the highest attainable standards of health and the right to education; (5) the right to self-determination and political participation, access to information, and freedom of expression, belief, opinion, association, and religion; and (6) the rights of vulnerable groups and persons, particularly women and children.

North Korea does not have an independent judiciary and “socialist norms of life” and a “collective spirit” are emphasized over individual rights. The UN Commission on Human Rights since 2003 and the General Assembly since 2005 have recognized and condemned, by overwhelming margins, severe violations in North Korea including the use of torture, public executions, extrajudicial and arbitrary detention; the absence of due process and the rule of law; imposition of the death penalty for political offenses; and the large number of prison camps and use of forced labor. The authorities are assisted by a huge network of informers that monitors nearly all correspondence and communication and can subject entire communities to security checks. North Korea has two police forces: one to address “ordinary crimes” called the People’s Safety Agency and another political police force called the State Security Agency.

Freedom of movement does not exist. Forced internal resettlement is routine. Access to Pyongyang, where the availability of food, housing, and health care is somewhat better, is tightly restricted. Emigration is illegal, although exit visas are sometimes issued to trusted businessmen, athletes, scholars, and religious figures. Defection is a capital crime punishable by death. Controversy has developed over the Chinese government's willingness to return defectors to North Korea, where they are subject to torture, harsh imprisonment, or death.

Despite recent market reforms, North Korea's economy remains both centrally planned and grossly mismanaged. The government assigns all jobs, prohibits private property, and spends nearly one-third of its gross domestic product on its military. The economy is also hobbled by a lack of infrastructure, a scarcity of energy and raw materials, and an inability to borrow on world markets or from multilateral banks because of sanctions, lingering foreign debt, and ideological isolationism.

Little is known about how problems such as domestic violence or workplace discrimination may affect North Korean women. There have been widespread reports of trafficked women and girls among the tens of thousands of North Koreans who have recently crossed into China. The UN Commission on Human Rights and the UN General Assembly have noted the use of forced abortions and infanticide against pregnant women forcibly repatriated from China. During the height of the famine crisis, the regime allowed private markets to arise. The fact that most of the market sellers are women has accounted for a real if unplanned increase in the status and wealth of women in North Korea.