

North Korea

Political Rights:	7
Civil Liberties:	7
Status:	Not Free

Overview:

North Korea's foreign relations continued in 2004 to center around the rest of the world's efforts to engage the isolated Asian nation in talks about its self-proclaimed nuclear weapons program. No real progress on the issue had been made as of late 2004, as several rounds of talks held throughout the year produced empty promises. In September, a huge explosion suspected of being a nuclear test was reported.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established in the northern part of the Korea Peninsula in 1948 following three years of post-World War II Soviet occupation. At independence, North Korea's uncontested ruler was Kim Il-sung, a former Soviet army officer who claimed to be a guerrilla hero in the struggle against Japan, which had annexed Korea as a colony in 1910. North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950 in an attempt to reunify the peninsula under Communist rule. Drawing in China and the United States, the ensuing three-year conflict killed as many as two million people and ended with a ceasefire rather than a 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 power base during the Cold War, purging rivals, throwing thousands of political prisoners into labor camps, and fostering a Stalinist personality cult that promoted him as North Korea's "Dear Leader." The end of the Cold War, however, brought North Korea's command economy to the brink of collapse, as Pyongyang lost crucial Soviet and East Bloc subsidies and preferential trade deals.

Kim's death in 1994 ushered in even more uncertainty. Under his son, the reclusive Kim Jong-il, the regime has maintained its rigid political control but has taken modest steps to free up North Korea's centrally planned economy. During the initial years of Kim Jong-il's rule, the situation grew even bleaker as natural disasters, economic mismanagement, and restrictions on the flow of information combined to kill an estimated one to two million North Koreans between 1995 and 1997, according to the U.S. State Department.

The threat of acute famine has receded thanks in part to foreign food aid, but a 2002 UN study found that more than half the population suffers from malnutrition. Moreover, North Korea's state-run health system has all but collapsed, hospitals lack adequate medicine and equipment, and clean water is in short supply because of electricity and chlorine shortages.

Against this backdrop, the economic reforms launched in July 2002 have made life tougher for ordinary North Koreans by igniting inflation and increasing unemployment. While the regime eased price controls, many of the promised salary raises designed to offset the higher prices have not materialized. The government has given factories more autonomy and has also allowed farmers to set up small markets in cities, something it has quietly tolerated for decades in the countryside. These markets now sell consumer goods as well as food. There is no expectation, however, of more far-reaching market reforms. The regime is adamantly opposed to any measures that would grant North Koreans significantly greater control over their daily lives, for fear of undermining its tight grip on power.

In September 2004, U.S. President George W. Bush signed the North Korean Humanitarian Act of 2004, which bans non-humanitarian assistance to North Korea due to the country's dismal human rights record. North Korea criticized the bill the following month, claiming that it "will pose a bigger obstacle at the six-party talks to solve nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula".

Tension over North Korea's nuclear weapons program was renewed in October 2002, when Pyongyang admitted to having a nuclear weapons program, and has remained unabated since then. In December 2002, North Korea threw out international inspectors monitoring its Yongbyon nuclear reactor. In 2003, Pyongyang not only made a series of boasts about its alleged nuclear capabilities and threatened to test a nuclear weapon, but also pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

International observers' worst fears seemed confirmed in September 2004 when a huge explosion was reported within the country. The North Korean foreign minister subsequently said that the explosion was merely the demolition of a mountain for a power project, not a nuclear test. Many analysts believe, however, that the greatest threat posed by North Korea is not an actual nuclear bomb, but the country's potential to sell plutonium to rogue states or terrorists for hard cash. In September 2004, North Korea postponed indefinitely the latest round of six-nation talks (including South Korea, the United States, Russia, China, and Japan) on the issue. No new date for the talks had been set as of November 2004, but North Korea did issue a statement in that month indicating that it would be "quite possible" to resolve the conflict if the US agreed to co-operate with the Communist regime rather than trying to destroy the entire system. The statement, the first since the re-election of U.S. President Bush in early November, was seen as something of a conciliatory gesture.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

North Korea is a dictatorship and one of the most tightly controlled countries in the world. The regime denies North Koreans even the most basic rights, holds tens of thousands of political prisoners under brutal conditions, and controls nearly every facet of social, political, and economic life.

Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader since 1997, and a handful of elites from the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) rule by decree, although little is known about the regime's inner workings. Kim is formally general secretary of the KWP, supreme commander of North Korea's 1.1 million-strong army, and chairman of the National Defense Commission. This last post has been the "highest office of state" since the office of president was abolished in 1998. North Korea's parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly, is a rubber-stamp institution and meets 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, and in the most recent elections, the Central Election Committee reported that Kim received 100 percent of the vote of his constituency. The government has created a few minority parties for the sake of appearances, but they do not fulfill any real electoral role.

North Koreans are subjected to intense political and ideological indoctrination. According to the U.S. State Department's human rights report for 2003, released in February 2004, "the cult of personality of Kim Jong Il and his father and the official *juche* ideology has declined somewhat, but remained an important ideological underpinning of the regime, approaching the level of a state religion." *Juche* refers to a national ideology of self-reliance (the

country is totally dependent on foreign aid); it is imparted to citizens through the school system, the state-controlled media, and work and neighborhood associations.

North Korea was not ranked by Transparency International in its 2004 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Press freedom does not exist in any sense. The KWP controls all cultural and media activities, and practices extensive censorship. Foreign media broadcasts are banned.

The “freedom of religious belief” guaranteed by the constitution does not exist in practice. Persons practicing unauthorized religious activity are subject to harsh punishment. Academic freedom is likewise nonexistent.

Although the constitution guarantees equal treatment to all citizens, the government maintains a highly developed system of official discrimination. Individuals are accorded security ratings, termed either “core,” “wavering,” or “hostile” in terms of their loyalty to the regime. Nearly all facets of life, including employment and educational opportunities, residence, access to medical facilities, and severity of punishment in case of legal infractions, are determined by the rating. The government rates its subjects on the basis of the reports of a huge network of informers. It monitors all correspondence and communication, and can subject entire communities to security checks.

The law bans independent civic, human rights, and social welfare groups. Unauthorized public meetings are forbidden, and there are no known associations or organizations other than those created by the government. The government controls all labor unions. Strikes, collective bargaining, and other basic organized-labor activities are illegal.

North Korea does not have an independent judiciary and does not acknowledge individual rights, emphasizing instead “socialist norms of life” and a “collective spirit.” Little information is available about specific criminal justice practices, as outside observers are generally not tolerated. Security forces are known to commit the most serious human rights abuses. Reports of arbitrary detentions, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings are common; torture is widespread and severe. The crimes for which capital punishment is the mandatory penalty are so broadly defined—“opposing socialism,” for example—as to render them effectively “subjective criteria” rather than actual crimes, in the words of the UN Human Rights Committee. Starvation, torture, and execution in prisons are common, and because the government prohibits live births in prisons, forced abortions and infanticide are standard practices. The government engages in collective punishment, whereby an entire family can be imprisoned if one member of the family is accused of a crime. The regime also runs a network of “re-education through labor” camps that are notorious for their brutal and degrading treatment of inmates. In November 2004, refugees fleeing the country reported the occurrence of systematic medical and scientific experimentation on political prisoners.

Freedom of movement does not exist. Although internal travel rules have been relaxed to the extent that citizens are now allowed to travel beyond their home village, this means little in practice because very few citizens have had any means of transportation. Permission to enter Pyongyang is tightly controlled. Exit visas are issued only to officials and some artists, athletes, academics, and religious figures. Emigration is illegal, and defection and attempted defection are capital crimes.

Despite recent market reforms, North Korea’s economy remains centrally planned. The government assigns all jobs, prohibits private property, and directs and controls nearly all economic activity. Besides being grossly mismanaged, the economy is hobbled by creaking

infrastructure, shortages of energy and raw materials, and an inability to borrow on world markets or from multilateral banks because of sanctions and a past foreign debt default.

Little is known about how problems such as domestic violence or workplace discrimination may affect North Korean women. There were widespread reports of trafficking of women and girls among the tens of thousands of North Koreans who have recently crossed into China.