

North Korea

Population: 23,500,000

Capital: Pyongyang

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

Status: Not Free

Ten-Year Ratings Timeline For Year Under Review

(Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Rating	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF

Overview:

While North Korea's relations with the United States appeared to thaw in 2008, relations with the South worsened after conservative president Lee Myung-bak took office there in February. Pyongyang expelled South Korean managers from the joint Kaesong industrial complex in April, and North Korean forces shot and killed a South Korean tourist in July. In August, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il was reported to have suffered a stroke, and questions about his health lingered at year's end. North Korea made no progress on human rights in 2008, and experienced severe food shortages in the wake of floods in 2007.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) was established in 1948 after three years of post-World War II Soviet occupation. The Soviet Union installed Kim Il-sung, an anti-Japanese resistance fighter, 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 ceasefire 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 after the 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." Marxism was eventually replaced by the DPRK's "Juche ideology" (translated as self-reliance), which combined extreme nationalism, xenophobia, and the use of state terror. After Kim Il-sung died in 1994, he was proclaimed "Eternal President," but power passed to his son, "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il.

The end of the Cold War and its associated Soviet and Chinese subsidies led to the collapse of North Korea's command economy. Although the severe floods of 1995 and 1996 compounded the problem, the famine of the 1990s, which killed at least a million people, was caused by decades of severe economic mismanagement. As many as 300,000 North Koreans fled to China in search of food, despite a legal ban on leaving the DPRK. In 1995, North Korea allowed the United Nations and private humanitarian aid organizations from Europe, North America, and South Korea to undertake one of the world's largest famine-relief operations. Despite continuing food shortages over the next decade, the DPRK in 2005 instructed the UN

World Food Programme (WFP) to either switch from humanitarian relief to development assistance or leave North Korea. The DPRK continues to force the international community to bear the burden of feeding its citizens while it devotes resources to its military-first policy.

The economic breakdown prompted the emergence of black markets to deal with the extreme shortages. The degraded state turned a blind eye, allowing illicit trade to flourish. Meanwhile, the regime instituted halting economic reforms in 2002, which included easing price controls, raising wages, devaluing the currency, and giving factory managers more autonomy. More extensive changes, which could ultimately undermine the dictatorship's grip on power, were rejected.

Kim Jong-il's regime was kept afloat by Chinese and South Korean aid, as both neighbors feared that a state collapse could lead to massive refugee outflows, military disorder, the emergence of criminal gangs and regional warlords, and a loss of state control over nuclear weapons.

The DPRK had withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003, and it raised alarm in the region by testing ballistic missiles and a nuclear device in 2006. In February 2007, the regime agreed to denuclearize in three phases in return for fuel aid and other concessions from its four neighbors and the United States. However, it did not complete the disablement of its nuclear facilities by the end of 2007 as promised, citing delays in aid deliveries and other complaints. North Korea handed over its required "declaration" of nuclear assets in June 2008, and demolished a nuclear cooling tower as a token of good faith. The United States demanded that a verification protocol accompany the asset declaration, but the North refused and threatened to restart its Yongbyon nuclear reactor unless the United States fulfilled its promise to remove North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. The United States reluctantly agreed to do so in October, despite North Korea's lack of progress on human rights. Meanwhile, in February 2008, the New York Philharmonic held a groundbreaking concert in Pyongyang to foster cultural understanding and promote diplomacy.

While North Korea's relations with the United States appeared to thaw, its ties with South Korea broke down after Lee Myung-bak, a conservative, took office as president there in February 2008. Pyongyang expelled South Korean managers from the countries' joint Kaesong industrial complex in April, and DPRK security forces killed a Southern tourist visiting the Mount Kumgang resort in July. Severe 2007 floods resulted in acute food shortages in 2008, but Pyongyang rebuffed Seoul's offer of food aid and fertilizer. In November, North Korea expelled hundreds of South Koreans working in the Kaesong Industrial Complex, citing the South's "relentless confrontation."

In August, credible news reports in South Korea suggested that Kim Jong-il had suffered a stroke. He failed to appear at an important military parade and other public functions, and speculation about his health continued at year's end. North Korean authorities have released several photos of Kim Jong Il, allegedly on recent inspection tours, to dispel rumors that he is ill. Some analysts have claimed that those photos have been older pictures that have been doctored. Kim Jong Il's public appearances have yet to be shown on video.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

North Korea is not an electoral democracy. Kim Jong-il has led the DPRK since the 1994 death of his father, founding leader Kim Il-sung. He has many titles but rules as the chairman of the National Defense Commission, 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 elected to five-year terms; the latest elections were held in August 2003. The body meets irregularly for only a few days each year. It last elected Kim Jong-il as National Defense Commission chairman in September 2003. All candidates for office, who run unopposed, are preselected by the ruling Korean Workers' Party and two subordinate minor parties.

North Korea was not ranked in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index, though corruption is believed to be endemic at every level of the state and economy.

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press, but in practice these rights are nonexistent. All 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. Internet access is restricted to a few thousand people with state approval, and foreign websites are blocked. Still, the emergence of black markets has provided alternative information sources. Some entrepreneurs carry cellular telephones, and a significant portion of North Koreans have access to pirated videotapes and DVDs of South Korean dramas that are smuggled in from China. Increasing contacts across the border with China have resulted in an influx of radios capable of picking up foreign broadcasts.

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 living near the Chinese border are known to practice their faiths furtively. However, intense state indoctrination and repression preclude free exercise of religion as well as academic freedom. Nearly all forms of private communication are monitored by a huge network of informers.

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. Despite these bans, it has been reported that scores of women have banded together to protest government crackdowns on black-market activities—an act that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

North Korea does not have an independent judiciary. The UN General Assembly has recognized and condemned severe DPRK human rights violations including the use of torture, public executions, extrajudicial and arbitrary detention, and forced labor; the absence of due process and the rule of law; death sentences for political offenses; and a large number of prison camps. The regime subjects thousands of political prisoners to brutal conditions, and collective or familial punishment for suspected dissent by an individual is also a common practice. 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.

Freedom of movement does not exist, and forced internal resettlement is routine. Access to Pyongyang, where the availability of food, housing, and health care is somewhat better than in the rest of the country, is tightly restricted. Emigration is illegal, but many North Koreans, especially women, have escaped to 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. Corruption is rampant, and the military garners over a third of the state budget. Development 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. Ironically, the degradation of the state has provided a very narrow opening for North Korean citizens to participate in the underground economy. This proliferation of black-market trade has given many North Korean citizens a field of activity that is largely free from government control.

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 also noted the use of forced abortions and infanticide against pregnant women who are forcibly repatriated from China.