



Freedom in the World 2013 - North Korea

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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 7.0
Civil Liberties: 7
Political Rights: 7

Overview

Efforts were made to quickly solidify and legitimize Kim Jong-un's rule in 2012 after his father's death the previous year. In April, North Korea conducted a controversial, though ultimately unsuccessful, rocket launch, attracting international condemnation and nullifying a recent agreement with the United States. A number of new economic and agricultural policies were announced during the year to address key deficiencies in the country's economy. Meanwhile, tensions with South Korea flared late in the year prior to the South Korean presidential election.

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 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 three-year conflict resulted in the deaths of 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, consigning thousands of political prisoners to labor camps, and fostering an extreme personality cult that promoted him as North Korea's "Great Leader." Marxism was replaced by the "Juche" (translated as "self-reliance") ideology, which combines 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, Kim Jong-il.

The end of the Cold War and associated subsidies from the Soviet Union and China led to the collapse of North Korea's command economy. Decades of severe economic mismanagement were

exacerbated by harsh floods in 1995 and 1996, resulting in a famine that killed at least a million people. As many as 300,000 North Koreans fled to China in search of food, despite a legal ban on leaving the country. The emergence of black markets helped to deal with extreme shortages of food and other goods, and illicit traders smuggled in various items from China. In 1995, North Korea allowed the United Nations and private humanitarian aid organizations to undertake one of the world's largest famine-relief operations. The DPRK continues to force the international community to bear the burden of feeding its citizens while it devotes resources to its military.

The regime instituted halting economic reforms in 2002, easing price controls, raising wages, devaluing the currency, and giving factory managers more autonomy. China and South Korea also continued to provide aid, fearing that 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 withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003 and proceeded to test ballistic missiles and a nuclear device in 2006. In early 2007, the regime agreed to denuclearize in exchange for fuel aid and other concessions from its four neighbors – China, South Korea, Japan and Russia – and the United States, but further negotiations and implementation of the deal proceeded haltingly. In 2008, Pyongyang handed over its declaration of nuclear assets and disabled its Yongbyon nuclear plant, and the United States removed North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

In April 2009, the DPRK tested a long-range missile and announced its withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks. In response, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1874, which tightened weapons-related financial sanctions and called on all governments to search North Korean shipments for illicit weapons.

In November, the government announced a currency revaluation and other measures designed to curb private trading and reassert state control over the economy. With the crippled black market unable to meet demand, prices rose sharply. The economy was disrupted further in early 2010 when the government banned the use of foreign currency. In February 2010, the government backtracked on the currency revaluation, issuing a rare formal apology and allowing markets to reopen.

North Korea responded to joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises in the West Sea with a surprise attack on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island in November. South Korea launched a brief counterattack, which resulted in several South Korean casualties, including the first civilian deaths since the Korean War. North Korean authorities also revealed to the international community that they had built a uranium enrichment facility.

With inter-Korean tensions high, South Korea denounced North Korean requests for food aid in early 2011, and the United States followed suit. All inter-Korean cooperative activities were stalled except for the operation of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex, a joint North-South Korean economic venture. In February, a series of food assessments found chronic malnutrition in North Korea. In May, the U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights led another food assessment team into North Korea, marking the first time a designated human rights envoy had been allowed in the country, though he was not there for formal negotiations. In June, the European Union pledged \$14.5 million in food aid to North Korea, and South Korea approved humanitarian efforts and food aid through third party organizations.

In October, U.S. and North Korean officials met in Geneva to move the two countries towards renewing dialogue on nuclear disarmament and improving relations. Prospects for resuming multilateral nuclear negotiations seemed high until December 17, when Kim Jong-il died of a heart attack at the age of 69. Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's third son succeeded his father as the country's leader without a major power struggle.

Efforts to solidify and legitimize Kim Jong-un's power were swift. On December 30, a special meeting of the Politburo officially appointed him Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army. On April 11, 2012, the Korean Workers' Party convened the Fourth Party Conference and anointed Kim Jong-un as First Secretary – the official head of the party – along with other titles formerly held by his father, including "eternal general secretary." On April 13, the Supreme People's Assembly met and appointed Kim Jong-un to the helm of the National Defense Commission, while elevating his father to the post of eternal chairman.

Meetings between the United States and the DPRK continued in early 2012, culminating on February 29 with an accord known as the "Leap Day Agreement." While the specifics of the agreement were ambiguous, the general terms were for North Korea to put a moratorium on uranium enrichment and missile testing in exchange for food aid from the United States, with more substantive negotiations to follow. The agreement was nullified within days, however, when the DPRK announced its intent to launch a satellite into space.

The April 13 rocket launch, which was ultimately unsuccessful, was part of a number of activities arranged for the centenary birthday celebrations of Kim Il-sung. On April 15, Kim Jong-un addressed the public, vowing that the North Korean people would "not have to tighten their belts again." Many experts believed the statement, as well as several key cabinet appointments, indicated a shift in policy focus from the military to the economy.

In July, the replacement of the chief of the Korean People's Army (KPA) sparked a number of military defections. In October, additional North Korean leaders were purged, and the vice minister of the KPA was reportedly executed. Meanwhile, a soldier from the Minkyung Unit – which generally consists of soldiers chosen specifically for their perceived loyalty to the regime – shot and killed two of his superiors before escaping across the Military Demarcation Line.

Inter-Korean tensions rose toward the end of the year when North Korea attempted to influence the South's December elections through a series of small provocations and threats. Also in December, North Korea conducted another rocket launch, successfully putting a satellite into orbit. Although this was a weather satellite, the international community feared the implications for North Korea's ability to develop nuclear warhead technology.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

North Korea is not an electoral democracy. 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-un became the country's new leader after his father's death in December 2011. 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 and two subordinate minor parties.

Corruption is believed to be endemic at every level of the state and economy. North Korea was ranked 174 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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. In January 2012, the Associated Press opened a bureau office in Pyongyang. 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. Cell phones were introduced to North Korea in 2010, and the one millionth subscriber was signed in 2012. The cell phone network is limited to domestic use only, with foreign residents on separate networks.

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 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.

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. South Korean reports suggest that up to 154,000 political prisoners are held in six detention camps. Inmates face brutal conditions, and collective or familial punishment for suspected dissent by an individual is 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.

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. This disparity has increased, with the capital featuring more luxuries for a growing middle class. Emigration is illegal, but many North Koreans 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. 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. In 2012, a number of new laws were announced to improve the business environment for foreign investment. New agricultural policies, meanwhile, would introduce smaller work teams on the collective farms and permit farmers to keep 30 percent of their output. The new policies were proposed for three counties as a trial phase, and there is skepticism as to how the changes, if successful, would be implemented on a national scale.

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.

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