

# LIVING IN NORTH KOREA

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# NORTH KOREA AT A GLANCE





**Official Name**

Democratic People's  
Republic of Korea

**Size**

46,541 square miles  
(120,541 sq. km)

**Total Population**

25,248,140 as of 2017

**Youth Population** ●

0–14 years: 20.78%;  
15–24 years: 15.59%

**Capital** ●

Pyongyang

**Type of Government**

Single-party state with  
official ideology of *juche*,  
or “national self-reliance”

**Language**

Korean

**Currency** ●

North Korean *won*

**Industries**

Military products; machine building;  
electric power; chemicals; mining  
(coal, iron ore, limestone, magnesite,  
graphite, copper, zinc, lead, and  
precious metals); metallurgy; textiles;  
food processing; tourism

**Literacy**

100% (age 15+ able  
to read and write)

**Internet Users** ●

Limited to a small number of  
elite users and scientists



# INTRODUCTION

## **The Hermit Kingdom**

Some North Koreans will do almost anything to escape their nation's prison-like borders. At age seventeen, Hyeonseo Lee fled on foot across the frozen Yalu River into neighboring China in quest of a better life. She survived frightening encounters with gangsters, pimps, and Chinese police before finally reaching South Korea and asylum. Having established a home in Seoul, Lee returned to China to help smuggle her mother and brother out of North Korea. She later wrote a book about her homeland and her experiences as a refugee. Her podcasts about North Korea caused a worldwide sensation on the Internet for their candid portrait of her home country. Today it is defectors, or political refugees, like Lee who provide the most reliable information about daily life in North Korea. Lee despises the repressive government in her native land, and she holds nothing back in describing the terrible conditions the people face. However, she also can evoke the simple pleasures of family life there. "Every word I'm speaking, it's not from myself," she says. "I'm speaking for and representing the people of communist North Korea."<sup>1</sup>

## **A Paranoid Desire for Control**

With its zeal for secrecy and seclusion, North Korea has long been called the Hermit Kingdom. It separated from South Korea after a Communist revolt in the late 1940s. Since then the nation has followed a path of totalitarian control. Kim Jong Un, North Korea's supreme leader, displays a paranoid desire to stifle outside influences and control every aspect of citizens' lives. From birth, the nation's 25 million people are fed a steady diet of propaganda about the near godlike qualities of Kim and his forebears.

The government controls all news and information. Through the state-run media, North Koreans are told of their country's matchless standard of living. Stories about poverty, famine, and prison camps do not appear in state media. In fact, among 197 nations ranked for press freedom by the research group Freedom House, North Korea ranks dead last.

Information sources, from newspapers to television shows, must slavishly follow the government line. Radios are wired so as to pick up only government frequencies. Even the Internet operates under strict control by the state. Citizens with computers and cell phones are restricted to a state-run system with a limited number of websites. Government officials with special privileges can access the wider Internet, but even they are blocked from many sites. As a result, North Koreans tend to have limited knowledge of the outside world.

Movement inside the country also is tightly controlled. The average family cannot simply pack up and move to another part of the country in search of better jobs or schools. A special permit is required to travel from one province to another. The capital of Pyongyang, where most high-profile jobs are located, is generally closed to those who do not live there. Although internal travel is rare, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans have been relocated by force to less desirable areas as punishment for political offenses.

In the countryside, life is marked by hard work and little reward. People grow accustomed to a narrow world made up of family members, neighbors, and a few acquaintances. Shortages of food and household items are taken for granted. Bans on eating meat, which is scarce throughout the country, lead some to inform on neighbors who obtain meat via illegal vendors. Many citizens suspect the government is lying to them. But they refrain from speaking out for fear of winding up in a prison camp. People try to make the best of things, even as government intimidation rules their lives. "The level of fear is unimaginable," says Korean American journalist Suki Kim, who once taught English to elites

in North Korea. “It’s possible to be both happy and terrified all at once, and I think that’s the case for many North Koreans.”<sup>2</sup>

## Rising Tensions

Kim Jong Un’s distrust of the United States has led to rising tensions between the two countries. Like his father, Kim Jong Il, the younger Kim has been focused on developing nuclear weapons. North Korea has tested long-range missiles capable of striking far beyond

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—Suki Kim, a Korean American journalist who once taught English in North Korea

the Korean Peninsula. Nuclear experts agree they now can reach anywhere on the American mainland, including Washington, DC, although that is without the weight of a nuclear warhead. Kim has exchanged threats with President Donald Trump, who early in his presidency dismissed the dictator as “Little Rocket Man.”<sup>3</sup> Kim’s propaganda factory paints the United States as a failing country out to destroy North Korea.

Many North Koreans assume this is true, although they also enjoy smuggled films and TV shows from America.

Just as the government strives to keep its people in the dark, it works hard to keep facts about North Korea from reaching the outside world. Foreign journalists are not allowed to wander about the country on their own. Instead, they are escorted to carefully chosen sites. Tourists must stay with guides, who monitor every step they take. Government officials deflect probing questions or cut interviews short if they stray into unwanted areas. At the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, two hundred red-clad young women from North Korea drew a great deal of attention worldwide for their choreographed cheers. Yet none were allowed to speak to the foreign press. When outside news agencies report on North Korea, they are limited in what they can show. Most reports include shots of gleaming skyscrapers and stock footage of military parades overseen by a smiling Kim. The impoverished lives of rural North Koreans are never seen.





Statues of North Korea's former leaders tower over residents in the capital city of Pyongyang. Idealized images of the country's former leaders (the father and grandfather of current leader Kim Jong Un) can be seen throughout North Korea.

With this information blockade in place, the world relies on reports from academics who study North Korea, journalists who document aspects of North Korean life despite the obstacles, and the occasional humanitarian aid organization that has permission to provide services in the country. However, the most revealing information comes from defectors like Hyeonseo Lee. Many of these refugees have risked their lives to escape North Korea. They consider it their mission to provide the truth about their homeland. "North Korea is not the dictator's country," says Lee. "It's 25 million citizens' country, and they are suffering under the dictator. North Koreans are really nice, kind, pure people. I hate the dictator and the regime, but I love my home country."<sup>4</sup>

**"North Korea is not the dictator's country, it's 25 million citizens' country, and they are suffering under the dictator."<sup>4</sup>**

—Hyeonseo Lee, a defector from North Korea



the peninsula at the 38th parallel. By agreement, the Soviets took control of the northern half, helping create a Soviet-style Communist state. The United States and its Western allies administered the southern half, which became the Republic of Korea.

Kim Il Sung, a longtime Korean revolutionary and guerrilla fighter, crushed all rivals to become sole leader of North Korea. Kim admired Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin, and he followed Stalin's example by placing every part of society under government control. A single political party, the Workers' Party of Korea, held all power. Kim served as party chair. "Kim Il Sung masterminded a unique adaptation of Soviet totalitarianism so that North Korea turned out to be more Stalinist than Stalin himself," says historian Lucian W. Pye. "Indeed, Kim's commitment to [Communist ideas of] Marxism-Leninism was stronger than that of the Soviet bloc regimes in Eastern Europe or the communist regimes of China and Vietnam."<sup>7</sup> Under Kim, the North Korean government seized land from rich families and redistributed it to peasant farmers. The state also took

**"Kim Il Sung masterminded a unique adaptation of Soviet totalitarianism so that North Korea turned out to be more Stalinist than Stalin himself."<sup>7</sup>**

—Historian Lucian W. Pye

control of many private industries, introduced labor laws to protect workers, and gave women new rights. Citizens who opposed the new regime soon found themselves in prison or facing a firing squad.

Attempts to unify the two parts of Korea through the United Nations went nowhere. In 1950 war broke out between North and South Korea. Armed with So-

viet tanks, artillery, and rifles, the North Korean army invaded the South in an attempt to unify the peninsula under a Communist government. The bloody civil war continued for three years, with the Soviet Union and China backing the North and joint United Nations forces, including US troops, aiding the South. US bombing raids in the North left hundreds of thousands dead and prompted among North Koreans a longstanding bitterness toward America. The conflict ended in a cease-fire but no peace treaty, a situation that lasts to this day.

## Of Firing Squads and Assassinations

As many defectors have affirmed, public executions are commonplace in today's North Korea. They serve as bloody warnings that rebellion against Kim Jong Un's brutal regime will not be tolerated. People can be executed for crimes such as stealing grain or livestock or distributing media materials from South Korea. Executions often take place outside prison walls—in riverbeds, beside bridges, in sports stadiums, and in local market squares. Some prisoners have been executed by firing squads on school grounds, with pupils required to attend. These public killings, carried out before large crowds, serve to create an atmosphere of dread in the populace.

Fiendish methods of execution are reserved for those deemed to be dangerous enemies of the regime. In February 2017 Kim was enraged by five government officials who supposedly spread false reports about North Korea. Kim sentenced them to face a bizarre firing squad consisting of an anti-aircraft gun—thus blowing the accused officials to bits. Kim has also been resourceful in dealing with family members he considers a threat. In a Malaysian airport on February 13, 2017, two young women, one wearing a T-shirt that said LOL, smeared poisonous chemicals on the face of Kim's estranged elder brother, Kim Jong Nam. Within minutes Kim Jong Nam lay dead in the airport clinic. His crime was telling a Japanese journalist that his brother was "a joke to the outside world" and predicting that his brother's regime would not last long.

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## A Move Toward Self-Reliance

After the war, Kim consolidated his grip on the country. Although the Supreme People's Assembly held votes for president, in reality Kim made himself ruler for life. All who opposed him were tried and executed or driven out of government, leaving only those who never raised objections to his whims. He ruled with casual cruelty, ordering farmers whipped for hoarding grain or jailing workers for wrapping food in newspapers bearing his picture. Kim created a cult of personality, in which North Koreans considered him to be inseparable from the state. Some in the North came to obsess over

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