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Country:

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Year:

2015

FIW Status:

NF

PR Rating:

7

CL Rating:

7

Aggregate Score:

3

Combined Freedom Score:

7.0

Overview:

In February 2014, the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) released a 400-page report documenting a wide array of crimes against humanity. The report described these as more severe and widespread than any other in the contemporary world, and said they have arisen from "policies established at the highest level of State." The publication included linked reports, supporting documents, and first-hand testimony from witnesses and victims. It also had eight pages of recommendations calling for immediate economic, social, and political reforms in North Korea, as well as targeted sanctions against those who appear most responsible for these acts.

In October, a diplomatic offensive ensued, in part fueled by the introduction of a draft UN resolution that referred North Korea to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity and imposed targeted sanctions for rampant human rights violations. In late October and November, North Korea released the three American prisoners. Nevertheless, in December, the UN General Assembly passed a nonbinding measure calling for North Korea to be referred to the ICC. The UN Security Council subsequently voted to add the issue of North Korean human rights to its agenda for the first time.

In May, North Korea held bilateral talks with Japan, during which they agreed to open a new investigation into the fate of Japanese citizens abducted by North Koreans. In return, Japan

lifted some unilateral sanctions imposed over abduction issues, including a travel ban between the two countries, some limits on the transfer of money, and a ban on North Korean ships docking at Japanese ports for humanitarian purposes.

In July, North Korea's ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Ja Song-nam, issued a statement to the UN condemning the upcoming release of the movie "The Interview," which depicts the assassination of leader Kim Jong-un. In November, the computer networks of Sony Pictures Entertainment, the parent company of Columbia Pictures, were hacked. U.S. investigating authorities announced in December that evidence suggested North Korean involvement in the hack, and the U.S. government vowed retaliatory measures. Subsequent North Korean threats to attack theaters showing the film led Sony to delay the release. After much criticism from the U.S. government and the general public, Sony allowed some theaters to show the film in late December and released it online.

In January 2014, Kim Jong-un announced in his New Year's speech a commitment to simultaneous development of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear weapons) and the economy. This policy was first announced by his grandfather and former leader Kim Il-sung. Such a policy had been deemphasized under Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un's father and immediate predecessor, in deference to a policy of "military first."

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 0 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

Kim Jong-un became the country's new supreme leader after his father's death in December 2011. 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's titles include first secretary of the Korean Worker's Party (KWP), first chairman of the National Defense Commission (the highest state body), and supreme commander of the Korean People's Army. North Korea's parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly, is a rubber-stamp institution elected to five-year terms. All candidates for office, who run unopposed, are preselected by the KWP and two subordinate, minor parties.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

North Korea functions as a single-party state under a totalitarian familial dictatorship. The ruling KWP, which was founded in 1926 and led by Kim Il-sung, is the only legally permitted party. Kim Jong-un currently serves as the "first secretary" of the KWP, with Kim Jong-il as the "eternal general secretary."

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

Government control over society is absolute and information about the functioning of government is tightly controlled both to domestic as well as to external audiences. Most information is gleaned from North Korea's state media reporting, defector testimony, or

various informants in the country, though the accuracy and reliability of these sources varies widely.

Corruption is believed to be endemic at every level of the state and economy, and bribery is pervasive. North Korea shared the 174th—and last—spot with Somalia in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 3 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 0 / 16

All domestic 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 recent years, four foreign media outlets have established bureau offices in Pyongyang: the Associated Press, RIA Novosti, Kyodo, and Xinhua. In June 2014, Agence France-Presse (AFP) announced plans to open a bureau office in Pyongyang by the end of the year, and Reuters was also in negotiations to follow suit.

Internet access is restricted to a few thousand people from various segments of society, and foreign websites are blocked. The black market provides alternative information sources, including mobile telephones, pirated recordings of South Korean dramas, and radios capable of receiving foreign programs. Mobile phone service was launched in 2008, but phone calls and text messages are recorded and transcribed for monitoring purposes. However, foreigners have been allowed to bring mobile phones into the country and have access to 3G networks, enabling live social media feeds out of North Korea.

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.

There is no academic freedom. The state must approve all curricula, including domestically based, foreigner-led educational opportunities. Although some North Koreans are permitted to study abroad—at both universities and short-term educational training programs—these opportunities are also subject to crackdowns.

Nearly all forms of private communication are monitored by a huge network of informants.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

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.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

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. In March 2014, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution condemning the “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” in North Korea. In December, the UN General Assembly recommended that North Korea be referred to the ICC for crimes against its own people.

It is estimated that 80,000 to 120,000 political prisoners are held in detention camps in the country. This figure is lower than in past years due to the closing of two camps and the high mortality rates inside the camps. Inmates face brutal conditions, and collective or familial punishment for suspected dissent by an individual is common practice. 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.

In April 2014, Australian missionary John Short was detained for antistate religious acts and interrogated for 13 days before being expelled from the country. The same month, U.S. citizen Matthew Todd Miller was detained for “unruly behavior” while attempting to claim asylum upon entry as a tourist to North Korea. He was sentenced in September to six years of hard labor. In May, another U.S. citizen, Jeffrey Fowle, was arrested for leaving a bible in a nightclub and detained for trial. In October, Fowle was released and returned to the United States. The following month, U.S. diplomatic efforts succeeded in securing the release of both Miller and Kenneth Bae, who had been incarcerated in North Korea since 2012.

In May, South Korean missionary Kim Jung-wook, who was arrested in October 2013, was sentenced to life in prison for allegedly trying to set up underground churches and spying for the South Korean government. South Korean negotiations for the release of Kim have yet to be successful.

Laws do not prohibit same-sex sexual activity. In April 2014, the official news agency said the practice does not exist in North Korea.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16

There is no freedom of movement, 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. Recently, this disparity has increased, with the capital featuring more luxuries for a growing middle class. Emigration is illegal, but many North Koreans have escaped via China.

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 growing field of activity that is largely free from government control, and some have managed to engage in cross-border trade with China. In addition, the growing emphasis on building special economic zones (SEZs) has led to conditions more conducive to foreign investment. Local officials have more authority in the management of these zones and over experiments with small-scale economic policies.

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.

Women have formal equality, but they face discrimination and are rarely represented at high levels of government. Although they have fewer opportunities in the formal sector, they often work outside the socialist economy.

UN bodies have noted the use of forced abortions and infanticide against pregnant women who are forcibly repatriated from China. There have been widespread reports of trafficked women and girls among the tens of thousands of North Koreans who have recently crossed into China. Recent reports also suggest that prostitution of children continues unabated in North Korea and that the country’s deteriorating economy has led to an increase in prostitution, which is now rampant in ordinary residential areas.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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