



Korea, North — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Korea, North, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

[officially known as Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)]

09/06/1945 Start Indirect Rule Occupation Regime [by USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: On this date, the People's Republic of Korea was proclaimed (not to be confused with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea). Covering all of Korea at first, it was declared illegitimate by the United States Army Military Government in Korea on 12/12/1945 and from then on proceeded only in northern Korea. However, the Soviet occupational forces inhibited any self-determining ambitions and installed Kim Il-Sung as a pro-Soviet head of government. ¹The Soviet occupation established a command economy and began collectivization of agriculture, laying the groundwork for the later socialist state (Lankov 2002). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Furthermore, political liberties were as absent per LIED and can be interpreted as not really present per V-Dem's PCLI. The Soviet occupation systematically suppressed non-communist political organizations and established a single-party structure (Armstrong 2003). For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent.

09/09/1948 End Indirect Rule Occupation Regime [by USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Communist Ideocracy: On this date, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung, was founded on socialist principles and a Soviet-type political regime, focusing on economic self-sufficiency. Kim governed the nation with a firm grip, fostering a cult of personality that revolved around his portrayal as the „Great Leader“ of the Korean populace. The main regime party was the Marxist-leninist oriented Workers' Party of Korea (WPK).² The WPK established a hierarchical power structure with Kim Il-Sung at its apex, controlling all major political, economic, and military decisions. There were two other parties making up the Democratic Front for the Reunification of Korea, which were just satellites of the WPK (Savada 1994b). These nominal satellite parties—the Korean Social Democratic Party and the Chondoist Chongu Party—served primarily to create an illusion of pluralism while exercising no independent political power (Scalapino/Lee 1972)). Universal suffrage was introduced from the start of the regime. According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held on a regular basis between 1948 and 1972, but exclusively in a non-competitive, single-list format; following the 1972 constitutional reform, executive elections were discontinued, while legislative elections continued in a purely acclamatory form. The political evolution of North Korea reflects a complex interplay of ideology, leadership, and external influences. In the early 1960s, the regime adopted features of the Chinese political regime. This period coincided with the Sino-Soviet split, during which North Korea skillfully navigated between the two communist powers to maximize its autonomy and extract economic aid from both (Szalontai 2005). North Korea's ruling party, the Workers' Party of Korea, which was originally Marxist-Leninist, has also gradually distanced itself from orthodox communism, particularly since the 1970s, in favor of Juche. Juche is the name of the North-Korean state ideology developed by Kim Il-Sung. The ideology combines three core principles: political independence (chaju), economic self-sufficiency (charip), and military self-reliance (chawi). It elevates absolute independence in the economic, political and military domain to the central principle of the state. Along with these three central ideological pillars, Juche promotes values such as absolute dedication to the

leader, fervent nationalism and ethnical purity.³ The nuclear weapons program, initiated in the 1980s. Throughout its history, North Korea has faced economic challenges, including hypermilitarization and central planning, leading to food shortages and economic crises. The regime's relationship with China has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy and survival, especially since the Sino-Soviet split (Sukhoon 2014). Per FH, for this regime period, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. North Korea consistently ranks as one of the most repressive states in the world across all major democracy and human rights indices. Furthermore, the state of political liberties is indicated as absent by LIED und V-Dem's PCLI for the entire time. From 1949 to 1955, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints during this time. Between 1956 and 1965, based on Polity5's evaluation, the executive faced weak constraints, classified as Intermediate Category 1 between unlimited authority and slight limitations. This period saw Kim Il-Sung consolidating power by purging rival factions within the WPK, including the Soviet-Korean and Yan'an factions, establishing his personal dominance. Since 1966, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. The judiciary functions entirely as an instrument of state policy, with no independence from the ruling party or the Supreme Leader.

07/08/1994 End Communist Ideocracy/Start Personalist Autocracy: On this date, Kim Il-Sung died and was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-Il, marking a fundamental transformation in the regime's character. While maintaining the formal structures of the communist party-state, the regime increasingly centered on the personal rule of Kim Jong-Il and the Kim dynasty rather than ideological principles (Lim 2009). The transition occurred during the height of the Great Famine (1994-1998), which resulted in an estimated 600,000 to 1 million deaths and fundamentally altered the social contract between the state and citizens (Natsios 2001). The famine severely weakened party and state institutions while strengthening the military and security apparatus directly loyal to Kim Jong-Il. The formalization of the Songun (military-first) policy, formalized in the 1990s, elevated the Korean People's Army to the primary institution of state power and resource allocation (Gause 2006). The 1998 constitutional revision that established Kim Il-Sung as 'Eternal President' and removed the position of head of state further concentrated power in Kim Jong-Il's hands as Chairman of the National Defense Commission, making this effectively the supreme office (French 2014). The 2009 constitution removed all references to communism, replacing them with Songun ideology, cementing the transformation to personalist rule. Under Kim Jong-Il's personalist rule, power became concentrated in informal networks and the security services rather than formal party structures. The succession of Kim Jong-Un in 2011 continued this personalist pattern, with power transferred through family lineage rather than party procedures. The regime's classification as personalist autocracy reflects the dominance of the Kim family cult, the subordination of party and state institutions to personal loyalty networks, and the absence of institutionalized constraints on the leader's authority. This raises the serious question whether North Korea can still be considered a communist ideocracy, as its state ideology increasingly resembles a far-right ideology such as fascism. The debate centers on whether the regime's emphasis on racial purity, extreme nationalism, hereditary leadership, and de facto abandonment of international class solidarity marks a fundamental departure from communist ideology toward a unique form of nationalist-authoritarian rule. Following the devastating famines of the 1990s after the Soviet collapse, North Korea witnessed the emergence of informal markets (jangmadang) that gradually became tolerated by the regime, creating a hybrid economy alongside the failing state distribution system (Haggard/Noland 2007). The economic evolution towards a more internal market-oriented economy, combining a communist command structure with the Juche doctrine, has been a significant aspect of North Korea's recent history (Stock 2019). The succession from Kim Il-Sung to Kim Jong-Il (1994) and later to Kim Jong-Un (2011) demonstrated the regime's ability to maintain dynastic continuity despite international predictions of collapse (Park 2002). The nuclear weapons program accelerated after 2000, becoming central to the regime's security strategy and international bargaining position. The

regime's development has also been led to a militaristic society and challenges in nuclear diplomacy (Becker 2005, Gerschewski/Köllner 2009). China provides approximately 90% of North Korea's energy imports and 45% of its food, making it an indispensable economic lifeline despite periodic tensions in the bilateral relationship. While the regime has strong personalistic features it is still as communist regime (Armstrong 2013). For now, however, we still list it as a communist ideocracy due to its historic and current ties to communist ideocracies as the USSR and PRC. The constitutional amendments of 2009 and 2019 significantly reduced references to communism and Marxism-Leninism, while the 2019 constitution elevated the status of the Supreme Leader above the party, reflecting the regime's ideological evolution.

Personalist Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional Sources (Lankov 2006, Kim 1971)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Republic_of_Korea

² <https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Korea>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_North_Korea

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Juche>;

<https://www.geopolitica.info/juche-and-north-korea-or-the-strong-between-an-ideology-and-regime/>

References

- Armstrong, Charles K. (2003): *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Armstrong, Charles K. (2013): Ideological Introversion and Regime Survival: North Korea's 'Our-style Socialism', in: Dimitrov, Martin K. (Hrsg.), *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 99-122.
- Becker, Jasper (2005): *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- French, Paul (2014): *North Korea: State of Paranoia*. London: Zed Books.
- Gause, Ken E. (2006): *North Korean Civil-Military Trends: Military-First Politics to a Point*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.
- Gerschewski, Johannes/Köllner, Patrick (2009): Nordkorea und kein Ende? Zum Wandel innenpolitischer Legitimation und externer Stützung der DVRK, in: Maull, Hanns W. & Wagener, Martin (Hrsg.), *Prekäre Macht, fragiler Wohlstand? Globalisierung und Politik in Ostasien*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 167-188.
- Haggard, Stephan/Noland, Marcus (2007): *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kim, Se-Jin (1971): *Politics of Military Revolution in Korea*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Lankov, Andrei (2002): *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Lankov, Andrei (2006): The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism, in: *Asia Policy* 1, 109-114.
- Lim, Jae-Cheon (2009): *Kim Jong Il's Leadership of North Korea*. London: Routledge.
- Natsios, Andrew S. (2001): *The Great North Korean Famine*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Park, Han S. (2002): *North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Savada, Andrea Matles (Hrsg.) (1994b): *North Korea: A Country Study*. Washington: Library of Congress.
- Scalapino, Robert A./Lee, Chong-Sik (1972): *Communism in Korea*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stock, Thomas (2019): North Korea's Marxism-Leninism: Fraternal Criticisms and the Development of North Korean Ideology in the 1960s, in: *Journal of Korean Studies* 24, 127 - 147.
- Sukhoon, Hong (2014): What Does North Korea Want from China? Understanding Pyongyang's Policy Priorities toward Beijing, in: *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 12, 277-303.
- Szalontai, Balazs (2005): *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.