

Kim Jong-un's new border wall could be a sign that his grip on North Korea is slipping

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The route I used to escape is now closed – but new technology makes it increasingly hard to keep the population under control

- Timothy Cho campaigns for religious freedom in North Korea with the charity Open Doors

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'Kim Jong-un's giant wall is a step in a larger grand project: to create a "clean" digital environment.' Photograph: 朝鮮通信社/AP

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hen I was a kid, I had a friend who was a smuggler. "You tell anyone

about this – *our lives are over*," he threatened, and suddenly grinned, delightedly revealing his prize: the latest 007 movie, *Die Another Day*.

Two decades ago, viewing foreign material in North Korea was highly dangerous – and it is the same today. The news that a two-year-old toddler has been [sentenced to life imprisonment](#) – because his parents were caught with a Bible – does not surprise anyone who observes the state's cruelty to those who prefer not to worship the Kim family.

And yet the "hermit kingdom" idea really is something of a myth – finding illicit smuggled material in [North Korea](#) is surprisingly easy. Today's "reactionary" content is K-pop, South Korean soap operas, text files of western novels or, if you're a Christian like me, the New Testament. A recent study of escapers revealed that 98% had viewed such "alien" material.

But it's clear that Kim Jong-un is quietly pushing back. Extraordinary satellite images [published by Reuters](#) last week have revealed Kim's secret pandemic project: a 489km (304 miles) reinforced security blockade along the country's northern frontier with China, complete with watchtowers, concrete walls, double fencing and barbed wire.

Many years ago, I used the intricate web of mountain passes in this area to make my escape – now it is sealed off. For North Koreans, these are vital lifelines to western medicine and pharmaceuticals, to news from outside and to precious “Chinese phones” – meaning any foreign phone with a sim card smuggled in from outside.

Kim's giant wall is a step in a larger grand project: to create a “clean” digital environment. In this project, control of smartphone technology is key. About 3 million North Koreans do own smartphones – brands like the Pyongyang and the Arirang, which are developed by the state. They cannot make international calls, or connect to the internet. Their software – cunningly – disables foreign files: clips, sound files, text files or apps not created within North Korea's [Red Star](#) operating system.

It is a “closed” environment, in which you see and hear only what Kim wants you to. And the phones have one fiendishly clever feature: the automatic capture of the user's activity history with continual random screenshots of messages, which the user cannot delete. Official inspections of the phone are mandatory, and the [Group 109 police squad](#) – a specialist squad cracking down on the viewing of foreign media – conducts regular raids on private homes. By creating his own hardware and software, and the Red Star operating system, Kim has invented a closed “digital state”.

Has Kim Yo-jong, Kim's sister (pictured), been eclipsed by his daughter as his chosen successor? Photograph: Jorge Silva/Reuters

But “Chinese phones” are a challenge for Kim – and, for the sharp broker, a great business. North Koreans save up astonishing sums to meet a broker and make a call. It's the only way of knowing whether your family who have escaped are dead or alive; perhaps your only chance to hear your child's voice again. Families go to great lengths to make these calls; the government goes to great lengths to place signal jammers near the borders. So even as he seals off the northern frontier, Kim is fighting on a communications frontier.

Many people suggest that Kim's border clampdown may be a mark of fragility – born out of alarm, or an attempt to balance power blocs, or a need to safeguard his position. Choking the black market is a sharp blow to those making a living from it, and they are more visible and more powerful than you might think.

Those most affected are the *donju* – the “money-lords” or “money-masters” – a tiny entrepreneurial class who were deliberately allowed to flourish at the start of Kim's premiership. This coterie of families – perhaps 50 in all – took advantage of the easing of economic restrictions after the famine of the 1990s and founded businesses, which were often linked to the supply of black market goods or foreign content.

Today the donju are wealthy; they exert influence over many sectors of the economy. Many are intimately involved with the elite – the same elite Kim is relying on for support. Squeezing the black market will squeeze them. Is Kim nervous of an elite with strong financial backing? Is this an attempt to bring the donju to heel?

Kim also looks uncertain in his health. In 2020, he disappeared entirely from view amid [rumours of heart surgery](#). In March, the North Korean state newspaper Rodong Sinmun began insisting that Kim [regularly works until 5am](#) – an apparent explanation for his puffy appearance and the dark circles under his eyes. Meanwhile Kim’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, who had been considered his chosen successor, has been lately eclipsed by high-profile appearances from his 10-year-old daughter, Ju-ae. In a paranoid environment, Ju-ae’s appearance is giving rise to a flurry of speculation.

Shifts are also visible in how the party treats its followers. Recent years have seen restructuring of the “Party Life” social credit rating for Workers’ party members. For millions of party members and government workers, it’s a form of loyalty points, run through digital accounts on phones. Members are graded and the most loyal and trusted rewarded with extra allowances of food and other sought-after goods. Over the past two years, the system has been undergoing a tightening up – as the leadership assesses who is entitled to what.

It is always difficult to pinpoint what changes mean in North Korea; but it’s clear that something is afoot. In this era of rapid technological advance, controlling the minds of 25 million people requires ever more astonishing reach, and my guess is that the Red Star operating system may not be enough. The loss of the old cross-border routes and the web of secret connections that eased the harshest aspects of life will cause ripples within North Korea.

Expect worsening malnutrition, intensifying mind games with the west and the increased brandishing of nuclear weapons. Things may get complicated.

- Timothy Cho was born in North Korea, where he was separated from his parents and lived as a street child. He was imprisoned four times, and escaped twice, succeeding the second time. He now campaigns for religious freedom in North Korea with the charity [Open Doors](#)