

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

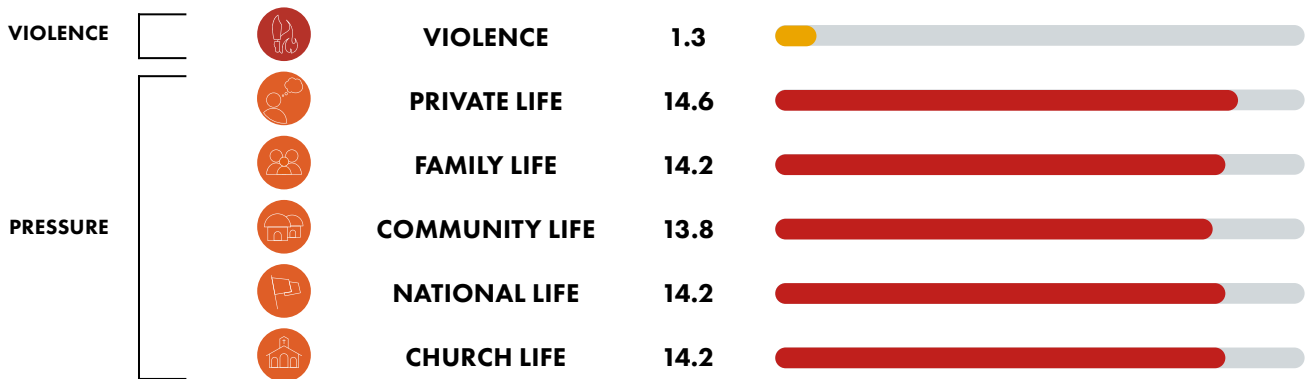
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
23

MAURITANIA



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Converts from Islam to Christianity face severe opposition from their own families and society. This restrictive environment makes it impossible for them to openly conduct religious services. Public expressions of faith by non-Mauritanian Christians (including migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia) also carry the risk of being viewed as proselytization of Muslims, and can lead to imprisonment and deportation.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Mohamed Ould
Cheikh el Ghazouani

POPULATION

5,030,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

11,100¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	11,100	0.2
Muslims	4,994,000	99.3
Ethno-religionists	19,400	0.4
Agnostics	4,800	0.1

Source²

Mauritania is one of the world's poorest countries, despite being rich in mineral resources. Culture is traditional and tribal at its core. The continued practice of slavery is one of the [major causes](#) of social division and acrimony; white Moors and Berbers are of Arab descent, while most slaves, called Haratines or black Moors, are of ethnic African descent. Almost all political and economic power is in the hands of the white Moors, which means the majority of society (70%) remains significantly marginalized.

Violent Islamist militants are particularly active in the eastern border regions of the country. Kidnapping by militants or other criminal groups is a risk throughout the country, especially for foreigners, although the

west of the country around the capital Nouakchott is generally safer.

The country's full name is the Islamic Republic of Mauritania; most Mauritians are Sunni Muslim. The government opposes proselytizing in any way, and government hostility towards converts from Islam to Christianity is high. In theory, the punishment for apostasy is the death sentence, though there are no known examples of this being applied in recent years. According to Middle East Concern, "The Press Act proscribes the printing, distribution and importation of non-Islamic religious materials, though private ownership is not illegal."

Most Christians in the country are foreigners, mainly from neighboring Sub-Saharan African countries e.g., Senegal and Guinea Bissau. They enjoy limited religious freedom and can attend worship services, but only in designated compounds. Any outreach to Mauritians, who are all supposed to be Muslim, is strictly forbidden. According to the World Christian Database (WCD), the majority of Christians in Mauritania are Roman Catholic.

The number of Mauritanian converts from Islam to Christianity remains low. They experience extremely high levels of family, societal and governmental pressure.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

How the situation varies by region

Tribal and family ties are especially strict in rural areas, but even in the capital city, Nouakchott, the pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity can be very high. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) are particularly active in the eastern border regions of the country, posing a threat to Christians.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Roman Catholic expatriates from sub-Saharan Africa make up the largest group, followed by Protestants and Evangelicals from countries south of Mauritania. There is a small Western Christian presence. African

migrant Christians lead a precarious existence due both to ethnic prejudice and pressure related to the Islamic extremism in the country.

Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Converts to Christianity

Christian converts from a Muslim background are very exposed to targeted pressure and violence from Islamist groups, their extended family, and the community. In this nomadic society, communal interdependence is necessary for survival. Converts lose their status in their community if their conversion becomes public knowledge, so most try to hide their faith.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.



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Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

This is the primary persecution engine operating in Mauritania. Mauritania is a self-proclaimed Islamic Republic and Islamism is the dominant political ideology in the country. Non-Muslims experience intimidation and persecution, particularly at the hands of Islamic groups. Large numbers of Mauritians have joined violent Islamic militant groups both in the northern African region and in Syria and Iraq. While the government tries to fight Islamic militancy on one side, at the same time it provides public space for Wahhabi and other radical Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution, as their new faith is not tolerated by their families and society.

Clan oppression blended with ethno-religious hostility

Tribal and racial tensions are intertwined in this very conservative and traditional country in which urbanization is a relatively modern phenomenon. When a Muslim becomes a Christian, he or she is not only worried about family and government pressure, but also about the shame felt by the whole tribal or ethnic group - leading to wider persecution. The issue of slavery in the country, which is linked to ethnicity, has also contributed to persecution since proponents of slavery argue that it is sanctioned by Islam. The campaign against slavery has triggered a hostile reaction

from Islamists in the country. Christian Sub-Saharan Africans residing in the country face a mixture of both religious and racial discrimination.

Organized corruption and crime

Tribal affiliation, religious and personal relationships are very important in Mauritanian society. Nepotism, clientelism and other forms of corruption are widespread, also within the government. Anti-corruption campaigns have only focused on minor figures. Journalists investigating specific cases of corruption involving state authorities or state-owned companies have been intimidated, detained and accused of defamation (BTI 2020, p.12). Powerful people with connections to the army and presidency can enrich themselves and act with impunity.

Islamic oppression

The current government is quite paranoid about its hold on power, and this can lead to extra persecution if any “Christianizing” influence seems to either threaten or shame the government’s powers. In addition, it tries to shore up its legitimacy among Islamic groups by suppressing Christianity. This has been ongoing, particularly since the 2019 presidential elections. Christianity is often equated with Westernization and is thus seen as a (foreign) threat by the government. is not tolerated by their families and society.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Within Mauritania’s tribal society, women are subject to the authority of fathers and husbands, making female converts the most vulnerable. They may be deprived of food, bullied or put under house arrest. Most women do not have a choice in marriage and may be forced to marry a Muslim man, risking ostracization if she refuses. Married female converts can easily be divorced with no means to survive, and polygamy is still practiced.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

Men

The Taliban pressurizes men to show that they are good Muslim heads of family by praying five times a day, attending mosques, fasting and wearing a “proper” beard. Christian men face ridicule, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse and potentially death because of their faith. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining their groups. In light of these pressures, Christian men, particularly converts, choose to keep as low a profile as possible, with some choosing low-level positions in the workplace to avoid unwanted attention.

Male typical pressure points

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	23	72
2023	20	72
2022	23	70
2021	20	71
2020	24	68

Mauritania scored the same as in WWL 2023 but dropped three places in the ranking. Average pressure is extreme at 14.2 points, but violence remains low at 1.3 points. The extremely high levels of pressure in particular in the private, family, national and church Spheres of Life are indicative of the pressure local Mauritanian convert Christians face from the family, community and the government. Likewise, expatriate Christians from sub-Saharan Africa face severe levels of discrimination from the Mauritanian community and the government, with their faith making them extra vulnerable on top of racial discrimination.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

Several incidents took place, affecting both indigenous and expatriate Christians in the country. However, few details can be provided due to security concerns.

- Baptisms can only be carried out in secret, and many converts from Islam are reluctant to be baptized, fearing discovery and charges of apostasy being brought against them.
- Converts that are discovered by their families often feel pressured into leaving the country.
- During the reporting period, at least two young women belonging to the community of converts from Islam to Christianity have been forced to marry against their will.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries	Christians forced to marry
2024	0	10*	1	2
2023	2	10*	7	0

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

It is often risky for Christians to reveal their faith. Expatriate Christians, especially those from a sub-Saharan background, are likely to face discrimination and abuse if publicly identified as a Christian. They may be accused of proselytism. Baptisms can only be carried out in secret and many converts from Islam are reluctant to be baptized; they fear discovery, which may mean charges of apostasy are brought against them. Conversion from Islam is legally prohibited, and those perceived to be critical of Islam risk the death penalty. While this law is largely symbolic, it remains a significant threat to Christian converts from a Muslim background.

Family life

All Mauritians and their children are automatically considered Muslim and registered as such. Christian children must attend Islamic classes at a public school and are more likely to face discrimination and harassment. Conversion to Christianity is grounds for divorce in Mauritania, and a parent whose conversion becomes public may lose custody of their children.

Community life

There is extreme communal pressure against Mauritians who do not follow Sunni Islam. Violations can take the form of ostracization, social

discrimination, economic exclusion or even violence. It is heightened by the fact that Mauritanian society is divided along ethnic lines, and its economy and government are steeped in corruption and clientelism. Expatriate Christians from a sub-Saharan background are discriminated against because of both the color of their skin and their faith..

National life

Mauritania has a criminal law that sanctions capital punishment for apostasy and blasphemy. Christians must operate carefully to make sure their words are not construed as criticism of Islam or the government.

Church life

Due to the legacy of French colonial rule, only the Roman Catholic Church has legal status and is allowed to maintain public buildings. However, the Catholic Church does allow Evangelicals to use a space within the main church compound for worship in the diocese of Nouakchott. As proselytism is strictly forbidden, expatriate churches are not allowed to welcome a Muslim inside the church building, let alone integrate a convert from Islam to Christianity into their community.

International obligations & rights violated

Mauritania has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Mauritania is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Mauritians who convert to Christianity face imprisonment and inhumane treatment while detained (ICCPR Arts. 7, 9 and 18)
- Female Christian converts face the threat of forced marriage to Muslim men, even before they become of age, to pressure them to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christian children must attend Islamic religious classes at public school and face discrimination and pressure because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christian converts are excluded from accessing communal resources and their businesses boycotted (ICCPR Art. 26 and ICESCR Art. 11)

Situation of other religious minorities

There is a very small but growing Shia Muslim minority in Mauritania. The Mauritanian government has historically had warm diplomatic relations with Iran and was hesitant to target Shia Muslims. However, in 2018 a Shia religious center was closed down. Sunni religious leaders in the country have increasingly vocalized their denunciations of the minority group, calling for the government to impose restrictions.



Open Doors in Mauritania

Open Doors raises prayer support for Christians in Mauritania.



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About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
