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# Mauritania: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Mauritania

## Brief country details

Mauritania: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
5,030,000	11,100	0.2

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

## Map of country



Mauritania: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	72	23
WWL 2023	72	20
WWL 2022	70	23
WWL 2021	71	20
WWL 2020	68	24

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

<b>Mauritania:</b>	
<b>Main Persecution engines</b>	<b>Main drivers</b>
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Clan oppression	One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Non-Christian religious leaders, Ethnic group leaders, Violent religious groups
Ethno-religious hostility	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Violent religious groups
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Violent religious groups, Organized crime cartels or networks

*Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.*

## Brief description of the persecution situation

Mauritania is staunchly Islamic and the restrictive environment makes it very difficult for Christians (and impossible for converts from Islam) to openly meet and conduct services for collective worship. Any expression of faith by non-Mauritanian Christians (e.g. migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa or aid-workers) also carries the risk of being understood as attempted proselytization of Muslims and can lead to prosecution.

## Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Mauritania has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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 might forcibly be married to Muslim men, even before they become of age, to pressure them renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christian children must attend Islamic religious classes at 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)

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

Several incidents took place affecting both indigenous and foreign 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. In December 2023 (outside WWL 2024 reporting period), it was reported that fifteen Mauritanian Christian leaders, as well as their family members, had been arrested after a baptism video was revealed and shared on social media ([Morning Star News, 22 December 2023](#)).
- Converts that are discovered by their families often feel pressured into leaving the country.
- Sub-Saharan African Christians residing in the country regularly experience faith based discrimination, including losing employment, receiving inadequate or no medical care or being hindered in attending church activities.
- The Roman Catholic Church (being the dominant denomination among Christian expatriates) is allowed to renovate the interior of churches. However, the renovation of the exterior of Catholic churches and the construction of churches belonging to other denominations is prohibited.
- All churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, have to operate carefully in order to avoid accusations of proselytism.

## Specific examples of positive developments

Mauritania remains staunchly Islamic and there are no indications that the situation concerning Freedom of Religion and Belief will improve in the near future.

## External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>



- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Morning Star News, 22 December 2023 - <https://evangelicalfocus.com/world/24787/15-christians-arrested-in-response-to-muslims-outrage-in-mauritania>

## WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Mauritania

### Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 reports (Mauritania is not included)	AI 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/</a>	
BBC News Mauritania profile - updated 22 May 2023	BBC Mauritania profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985</a>	28 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Mauritania Report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MRT">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MRT</a>	28 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Mauritania - updated 18 June 2023	World Factbook Mauritania	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mauritania/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mauritania/</a>	28 June 2023
Crisis24 Mauritania report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Mauritania report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/mauritania">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/mauritania</a>	28 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Mauritania profile 2023	EIU Mauritania profile 2023	<a href="https://country.eiu.com/mauritania">https://country.eiu.com/mauritania</a>	28 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Mauritania	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	28 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Mauritania not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Mauritania	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2023</a>	28 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries, Mauritania not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Mauritania profile	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/mauritania/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/mauritania/</a>	28 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Mauritania report	Girls Not Brides Mauritania	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/mauritania/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/mauritania/</a>	28 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Mauritania not included	HRW 2023 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023</a>	28 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Mauritania	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#mr">https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#mr</a>	28 June 2023
Middle East Concern – covering 24 countries	MEC Mauritania report	<a href="https://meconcern.org/countries/mauritania/">https://meconcern.org/countries/mauritania/</a>	28 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Mauritania	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/mauritania">https://rsf.org/en/mauritania</a>	28 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Mauritania	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/mrt">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/mrt</a>	28 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Mauritania	UNDP HDR Mauritania	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/MRT">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/MRT</a>	28 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Mauritania	IRFR 2022 Mauritania	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mauritania/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mauritania/</a>	28 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Mauritania not included	USCIRF 2023	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Mauritania - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Mauritania	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/bae48ff2fefc5a869546775b3f010735-0500062021/related/mpo-mrt.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/bae48ff2fefc5a869546775b3f010735-0500062021/related/mpo-mrt.pdf</a>	28 June 2023
World Bank Mauritania data 2021	World Bank Mauritania data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=MRT">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=MRT</a>	28 June 2023
World Bank Mauritania overview – updated 20 March 2023	World Bank Mauritania overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mauritania/overview#1">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mauritania/overview#1</a>	28 June 2023

### Recent history

Mauritania became a French protectorate in 1904 and gained independence in 1960. Until 1979, Mauritania claimed sovereignty over Western Sahara territory which used to be a Spanish colony. Mauritania has been under military rule for more than 30 years, with only a short democratic interlude in 2007. Promises to bring democracy back to the country have only resulted in rigged elections. The political situation of the country has been characterized by successive coups, with the army serving as the country's dominant political institution. The current president of the country, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, was elected in June 2019. He was the candidate for the ruling Union for the Republic party, which came to power in a military coup in 2008. Although some observers consider the election process not to have been free and fair, in general the presidential elections were seen as the first peaceful transfer of power in Mauritania's history (Global Freedom Index 2023/A1). On another positive note, anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid surprisingly came second with 18.58% of the vote.

In June 2021, former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was arrested on corruption charges. The process, which was probably political in nature, did not seem to disturb the political stability ([World Politics Review, 2 July 2021](#)). He was released on bail for health reasons in January 2022, with corruption charges pressed in June 2022 ([Middle East Monitor, 2 June 2022](#)). His trial began

in January 2023, with Ould Abdel Aziz denying accusations of money laundering, illicit enrichment and abuse of office, but refusing to reveal the sources of his wealth ([Al-Jazeera, 25 January 2023](#)). He subsequently pleaded "not guilty" and declared himself to be "the victim of a plot" ([Africa News, 6 April 2023](#)). Nonetheless, in December 2023 he received a 5 year prison sentence for money laundering and "illicit enrichment" ([Reuters, 5 December 2023](#)).

The COVID-19 vaccination campaign was started in March 2021, after the arrival of the first batch of vaccines from China ([Anadolu Agency - AA, 26 March 2021](#)). A year earlier, the country went into lockdown for two months after the discovery of the first COVID-19 cases ([The Arab Weekly, 11 May 2020](#)), followed by another lockdown in December 2020. The lockdowns were particularly devastating for the family incomes of Mauritania's black minorities: "The only way the poorest Haratines survive is to go out to work, for example, by travelling to employers' homes to do domestic work, selling wares on markets, offering repair services on the street or finding work at the docks or on construction sites" ([Antislavery International, 29 May 2020](#)). As of 27 December 2023, the country had registered 997 COVID-related deaths ([Worldometer](#)). It is assumed that testing capacity is low, but 86% of the population was fully vaccinated by end-2023 ([Trading Economics, accessed 27 December 2023](#)).

Most Christians in the country are foreigners, mainly from neighboring Sub-Saharan African countries. 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. The number of Mauritanian converts from Islam to Christianity remains low. They experience extremely high levels of family, societal and governmental pressure.

## Political and legal landscape

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is a constitutional semi-presidential republic, currently led by President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. The country is formally a multi-party democracy, but its parliament is completely dominated by the ruling Equity Party, formerly known as the Union for the Republic party. Although there is officially a system of checks and balances, the president rules de facto alone. Ghazouani took the presidency over from his former close ally Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who had led the country for more than a decade. Both men have a history in Mauritania's powerful armed forces, having both been senior officers under former dictator Maaouya Ould Taya (1984 - 2005) and having both played a key-role in the coups of 2005 and 2008. Initially, there were fears that Aziz would run for a third term, despite the Constitution limiting the presidency to two terms of five years. Instead of becoming a puppet president (as Abdel Aziz probably had wished), Ghazouani has fully taken over the reins ([World Politics Review, 10 January 2020](#)). As mentioned above, in June 2021, Aziz was even arrested on allegations of corruption during his presidency, with a 5 year prison sentence being handed down in December 2023.

Both president and former president belong to the 'Union for the Republic' political party, which was formed by Abdel Aziz himself. The party rebranded itself to the "Equity Party" in July 2022. Parliamentary elections were held in May 2023, with the Equity Party securing an absolute majority with 107 of the 176 seats in the National Assembly ([Africa News, 29 May 2023](#)). The Islamist 'Tawassoul' party having the next largest number with 11 seats. The 'Tawassoul' party is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and its presence is a clear reminder of the Islamist influence

in the country. However, despite its democratic appearance, Mauritania remains a country run by an elite class of high-ranking military officers and businessmen, in which tribal and ethnic ties play a major role.

### Other sources report

- Middle East Concern (MEC Mauritania profile) writes: "Mauritania's constitution establishes Islam as the State religion and as the religion of Mauritanian citizens. Apostasy and blasphemy are prohibited by the Penal Code, which states that any Muslim found guilty of apostasy, by word or deed, will be condemned to death. Any activity construed as non-Islamic proselytism is strictly prohibited. The Press Act proscribes the printing, distribution and importation of non-Islamic religious materials, though private ownership is not illegal. ... While churches are not formally registered, non-Islamic worship is permitted within a small number of designated sites, which are exclusively for non-Mauritanians".
- According to the Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU Democracy Index 2022](#) Sub-Saharan Africa, pp.55-60): Mauritania is classified as a 'hybrid regime', having been promoted from the category 'authoritarian'.
- Humanists International's 2020 [Freedom of Thought Report](#) ranks Mauritania as having grave violations: "The law and legal procedures of Mauritania are based on Sharia. Sharia crimes such as heresy, apostasy, atheism, refusal to pray, adultery and alcoholism are all contained in Mauritania's Penal Code. The Code includes punishments of lapidation, amputation and lashings. Sharia norms are also reflected in Mauritania's 2001 Personal Status Code (a legal code which regulates all matters related to marriage, divorce, family and inheritance issues). Its Article 311 states that for difficulties of interpretation as well as in cases where the Code is silent, reference should be made to Sharia".
- The Fragile State Index (FSI 2023 Mauritania) political indicators show improvement over the previous years, especially the category 'Human rights', but scores stayed high thus indicating that political freedom remains restricted. In addition, the Security Apparatus indicator further improved, "Group grievance" increased, with "Factionalized Elites" remaining very high. The latter being a clear indication of the influence and power lying in the hands of a small group of people.

### Gender perspective

Mauritania performed poorly on Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index (GIWPS 2021 Mauritania) ranking 157th out of 170 countries, reflecting its heavily discriminatory legal system. As of 2021, women in Mauritania held about [20%](#) of the seats in parliament (World Bank Gender Data Portal 2023). Legislation on rape is particularly inequitable; women who report rape risk being prosecuted for having sexual relations outside of marriage ([HRW 2021 Mauritania country chapter](#)). Given that a woman's testimony holds half of the evidentiary weight of that of a man, many choose to remain silent. A draft law on gender-based violence - which would provide greater rights for victims - has twice been rejected and remains pending. Laws make it relatively easy for a female convert to be forced into marriage; the "silence of a young girl" is viewed as consent for marriage (Article 5 of the Personal Status Code), and child marriage is permissible if the guardian views it to be "in their best interest." Escaping abusive marriage is problematic since divorce and custody laws also favor men.

## Religious landscape

Mauritania: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	11,100	0.2
Muslim	4,994,000	99.3
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	19,400	0.4
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	490	0.0
Atheist	420	0.0
Agnostic	4,800	0.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

According to WCD 2023 estimates, 99.3% of Mauritians are Muslim (the majority being Sunni) and this reality is reinforced by the official designation of the country as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Christians constitute only a very small fraction of the population (0.2%). Although Islam in Mauritania has traditionally been heavily influenced by Sufism, over the past few decades the influence of radical Islamic groups has become increasingly visible. The activity of Arab countries from the Gulf region (including the provision of development aid) has been significant in this process, "evident in the construction of hundreds of mosques and the founding of dozens of Islamic schools for children and adults." ([Carnegie Endowment, 1 March 2012](#)) However, the government is believed to actively combat "extremism, radicalization and terrorism" (US State Department IRFR 2022 Mauritania, p.5). This can be understood as an effort to curb the influence of Wahhabism.

The MEC Mauritania profile reports:

- "Christians face severe restrictions in practice. While expatriate Christians are permitted to worship, Christian activities are restricted to designated compounds. Christians and Christian NGOs must ensure that they avoid any interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytist. Mauritanian nationals who choose to leave Islam would in principle face the death sentence under the apostasy provisions of the Penal Code, although there are no known examples of a judicial death sentence being applied for apostasy in recent years. However, those who leave Islam are likely to face violent responses from family or community members."

Christianity is viewed as a condemnable Western influence and proselytizing is strictly forbidden. Government hostility towards converts from Islam to Christianity is high, but non-Mauritanian Christians are usually left alone as long as they refrain from any public expression of Christian faith. Most Christians in Mauritania come from neighboring Sub-Saharan countries. They face discrimination in employment, but this is mostly in the form of racial discrimination, which is faced by all dark-skinned people in Mauritania. In addition, they face economic difficulties due to the government's Arabization policy which leaves less room for foreign workers, especially Christian foreign workers. Mauritians depend very much on their families and tribal relationships for economic security. Converts from Islam to Christianity have to face being expelled by their families and losing their livelihood. Mauritania remains staunchly Islamic with a significant presence of Islamist groups, including those related to the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, Mauritanian converts from Islam to Christianity are at high risk of societal discrimination and even physical violence.

A telling example of how restrictive the religious landscape has become, is the case of journalist Eby Ould Zeidane. In June 2020, he suggested in a Facebook post that Muslims use fixed dates to observe Ramadan according to the Gregorian calendar, rather than Islamic tradition. After being arrested and charged with blasphemy (which carries the death penalty), he publicly repented following his release ([HRW 2021 Mauritania country chapter](#)).

## Economic landscape

According to the World Factbook Mauritania and World Bank Mauritania data:

- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$5,300 (2021 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 11.5%, with youth unemployment being twice as high at 23%
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 31.0% (2014 est.) A recently launched poverty initiative indicated that "56.9% of the population live in multidimensional poverty" ([MPPN, 13 March 2023](#)).

According to World Bank's Mauritania overview:

- **Economic growth:** "Growth accelerated from 2.4% in 2021 to 5.2% in 2022 supported by higher exports on the demand side, and the expansion of the agricultural sector on the supply side. In 2023, economic growth is projected to decelerate to 4.5%, driven by lower growth in the extractive industry, resulting from lower production of iron ore and gold, as well as lower agricultural output. The annual average inflation reached 9.5% in 2022 and is expected to decrease to 8.0% in 2023, as external pressure on prices subsides."
- **Account deficit:** "The current account deficit is estimated to have widened to 13.9% of GDP in 2022, up from 8.1% of GDP in 2021, due to high energy and food import prices, and lower export prices. The deficit is expected to be financed by Foreign Direct Investment in the extractive industry and concessional borrowing"
- **Economic outlook:** "The medium-term outlook is broadly favorable but subject to downside risks. Growth should average 6.2% of GDP in 2024-2025, with the onset of gas production in 2024, and a scale up of public investment. The fiscal deficit is expected to gradually narrow as revenue collection improves and spending related to energy subsidies decreases. Average inflation is expected to gradually fall to 5% by 2025, as international commodity

prices drop. Risks to the outlook include a protracted Russia war in Ukraine with additional negative spillovers on real, fiscal, and external sectors. Sustained high oil and food prices, combined with volatile commodity exports prices pose additional risks that could slow down economic activity and increase food insecurity. Regional insecurity in the Sahel is another source of risk. Mauritania is also exposed to recurring cycles of droughts resulting from climate change and that impact agricultural output and household income."

### Other sources report

- The [World Bank's](#) "World by Income" report puts the Mauritanian economy in the lower middle income category (World Bank, accessed 20 July 2023).
- The Fragile State Index (FSI 2023 Mauritania) shows improvements in the 'Economy' indicator, with 'Human Flight and Brain Drain' decreasing too (although remaining quite high). However, 'Economic Inequality' is on the rise.
- According to BTI Mauritania Report 2022: "The Mauritanian economy has a strong tendency towards oligopoly. A small number of businessmen and their families, usually easily related to specific Moorish (Bidhân) tribes or clans, control most of the large firms and enjoy an oligopolistic position (in banking; fishery, public infrastructures and construction, airlines, import-export of consumer goods and foodstuff, telecommunication, insurance and other fields)" (page 21). ... "Officially, unemployment remained just below 10%, at 9.6% in 2019. It is worth remembering that a May 2018 World Bank study noted that the real number could be closer to 30%, with higher rates for 18–34-year-olds" (page 27).

### Gender perspective

Women are among the most economically vulnerable in Mauritania, in part due to low education rates (particularly in rural areas). The expected years of schooling in Mauritania is 12.9 years for women and 12.7 years for men (UNDP HDR Mauritania). The government has taken steps to build more schools in remote areas, allowing more girls to attend secondary school ([Global Partnership, accessed 23 June 2023](#)). Despite this improvement, women's participation in the labor force market remains low and jobs in certain sectors are off bounds for women. The female labor force participation rate was 26.4% in 2022, compared to 66.6% for men ([World Bank Gender Data Portal 2023](#)).

Mauritanian women have the right to inherit, but receive less than their male counterparts; under Islamic law, daughters receive half the share that sons receive. In light of these factors, Mauritanian women are typically financially dependent upon men.

The [World Bank](#) stated in its Economic Update, June 2021:

- "Gender inequalities in human capital cost Mauritania 19% of its national wealth. Disparities are present from childhood and occur in numerous spheres of life, preventing Mauritanian women from fully participating in the country's economic activity. Although progress has been made over the past decade, women in Mauritania are still subject to discrimination in the legal realm. ... This legal discrimination occurs across a wide range of areas: in addition to unequal wages and restricted property rights, for example, women are denied access to certain jobs, do not have the legal capacity to be heads of household, and

lack protection against inequalities in access to bank loans and employment."

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Mauritania:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Mauritanian population (40%) are Haratines (black Moors). 30% of the population consists of Beydanes (white Moors), while another 30% is from Sub-Saharan decent.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with French being understood by the higher classes as well. Other national languages are Pular, Soninke and Wolof.
- **Annual population growth rate:** 2.0% (2023 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2022, 57.7% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 3.84%
- **Literacy rate:** 67% of the population can read and write; with a significant difference between men (71.8%) and women (62.2%) (2021), a strong increase from 54% in 2017.
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 57% of the population, making it another African country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities
- **IDPs/Refugees:** In 2023, Mauritania hosted 98,000 refugees from Mali. In addition, there are 26,000 Sahrawis living in Mauritania, who originally come from Western Sahara.
- **Life expectancy:** 65.6 years on average; women (68.1 years), men (63.1 years).
- **Education:** Mauritians enjoy 9 years of schooling on average (2019).

According to the UNDP Human Development Report Mauritania:

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Mauritania ranked #158 out of 191 countries. The assessment of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a low score of 0.556, making Mauritania one of the lower scoring countries worldwide and indicating the challenges to improve living conditions for its citizens.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.890, women are clearly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

According to a [World Bank Education Report](#) published on 22 July 2020, educational development in Mauritania remains at a very low level. The report lists several deficiencies:

- Extremely low levels of teacher competence and a shortage of qualified teachers
- Poor management of the sector and high levels of teacher absenteeism
- Poor condition of school facilities and inadequate learning materials
- Lack of continuity in the education cycle

### Other sources report

- **Culture:** "Mauritania forms a geographic and cultural bridge between the North African Maghreb (a region that also includes Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) and the westernmost portion of Sub-Saharan Africa. Culturally it forms a transitional zone between the Arab-Amazigh (Berber) populations of North Africa and the African peoples in the region to the

south" ([Britannica](#), accessed 20 July 2023).

- **Slavery:** Mauritanian culture is traditional and tribal at core. Mauritians blend various tribal and pre-Islamic cultural threads into modern day Mauritanian culture. The continued existence of the practice of slavery is one of the major problems in the country that causes social division and acrimony ([Minority Rights Group](#), accessed 20 July 2023) The issue of slavery is also a cause for division along ethnic lines among Mauritians: while white Moors and Berbers are of Arab-Berber descent; the descendants of the former slaves (of the white Moors) - who are also called Haratines or black Moors - are of ethnic African descent. In addition, another significant group are the Mauritians of Sub-Saharan descent, who mostly live in the region bordering Senegal. While the Haratines (black Moors) and the Beydanes (white Moors) speak Arabic, the Sub-Saharan Mauritians speak mostly other languages.
- **Marginalization of society:** Almost all political and economical power is in hands of the white Moors, which means that the majority of society (70%) remains significantly marginalized. This is also indicated by the Fragile State Index's 'cohesion indicators' which show that factionalized elites are a major factor of social instability and its potential to disrupt social life remains high (FSI 2023 Mauritania). The low literacy and life expectancy rate, combined with only 9 years of schooling on average are other indicators of this marginalization.
- **Poverty:** Mauritania is one of the world's poorest countries despite being rich in various mineral resources, including oil and iron ore. According to World Bank Mauritania data, only 0.5% of the land is arable, and there is little internal food security. Many Mauritanian children are malnourished, and when there is enough food, it is often too expensive for the poor to afford. While the government's adherence to World Bank's strictures of economic liberalization has brought financial growth, it has also plunged many of the working poor into even greater poverty. According to the World Bank Mauritania overview: "Poverty is estimated to have increased due to the pandemic, reaching 6.3% in 2022."

### Gender perspective

Much like its legal system, Mauritania's social and cultural norms are heavily influenced by Islamic principles. Men are considered the head of the household and decision-maker, whereas traditionally women are expected to manage household chores and child care. Mauritania has a particularly unusual – and damaging – tradition called Leblouh, whereby girls are force-fed large quantities of food; obesity is traditionally viewed as desirable and likely to enhance marriage prospects, particularly in rural areas of the country ([Harvard International Review, April 2022](#)). 37% of girls are married before they turn 18 (Girls Not Brides Mauritania).

Domestic violence is also widely tolerated within Mauritanian culture, particularly among the Soninkés, where violence is viewed as an 'act of love' ([Reuters, 25 February 2017](#)). According to the UNICEF Situation Report 12, the COVID-19 restrictions caused an increase in the level of gender-based violence ([BMJ, 7 June 2023](#)).



## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Mauritania):

- **Internet usage:** 21.5% penetration (January 2022)  
The low level of internet access, especially when compared with other North-African countries, is indicative of the development challenges Mauritania faces.
- **Facebook usage:** 21.5% penetration (January 2022)

According to [Napoleon Cat \(May 2023\)](#), the majority of Facebook users are men, making up 64% of the user group.

According to World Bank Mauritania data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 141.1 per 100 people

According to Georgetown (GIWPS 2021 Mauritania profile), 72.6% of women used a cell phone as of 2021; this falls behind the country average, indicating a gender gap.

According to Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2023, which rates Mauritania as "partly free":

- "Mauritania has a vibrant media landscape, with several privately owned newspapers, television stations, and radio stations in operation. However, journalists who cover sensitive topics or scrutinize the political elite may face harassment, wiretapping, and occasional arrest. Several repressive laws remain on the books, including those criminalizing defamation, the dissemination of 'false' information, cybercrime, and blasphemy. Authorities have routinely arrested journalists for publishing critical content in the past."

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Mauritania #86 out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index 2023, a rise of 11 ranks compared to the 2022 index (#97). RSF states:

- "Press law violations were de-criminalized nearly 10 years ago, allowing journalists to work in a less repressive – but financially precarious – environment. ... Mauritania is multicultural and multiethnic, but members of the Moorish ethnic group control most media, which affects content diversity. Media are reluctant to take on issues involving marital rape, sexuality and slavery, as well as corruption, the military, Islam and inequality between communities."

North Africa is developing quickly in regard to Internet access, although Mauritania remains an underdeveloped country. The government probably lacks the resources to actively monitor the Internet, but public disagreement with the government or any content insulting Islam is punishable. The case of the [blogger](#) Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'khaitir, which led to a tightening of the apostasy law, is a prominent example (BBC News, 30 July 2019).

Although the growth of Internet access and social media usage is a help for converts to Christianity to make contact with other Christians, this is still fraught with difficulty due to the lack of technological development in many regions as well as a lack of privacy in the family sphere.

## Security situation

Violent Islamic militant groups, such as 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. Kidnapping by those or other criminal groups is a risk throughout the country, especially for foreigners. Although this has not happened recently in Mauritania itself, two Mauritanian and three Chinese construction workers were kidnapped in Mali close to the Mauritanian border in July 2021 ([Reuters, 18 July 2021](#)). In March 2023, three imprisoned jihadists managed to escape from their prison in Nouakchott, and were subsequently killed during efforts to recapture them ([France24, 11 March 2023](#)).

AQIM has been a challenge to the Mauritanian government since 2005 but the armed forces have had success in combatting this militant group. The USA has repeatedly expressed its concern over the steady spread of al-Qaeda's North African branch to the south of the continent in recent years. Nonetheless, according to a recent report, Mauritania's strategy of preventing radicalization by engaging in ideological dialogue with jihadists has, together with other measures, successfully caused a drop in the number of young adults joining violent militant groups ([ISS, 1 April 2022](#)). However, this leaves the option open that Mauritania might develop into a more radical Islamic country, since i) an inherent part of this government strategy seems to involve the process of appeasing jihadists, and ii) there is significant support for radical Islamic ideology among the general population.

Although the Mauritanian courts were able to counter Islamist calls for the execution of blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M'Kheitir in 2019, it is nevertheless worrying that the Mauritanian government actively engaged in negotiations with radical Islamic groups and appeared to publicly support their cause ([BTI 2020](#), p.7). Appeasing these groups might help to prevent attacks being carried out, but it means that their ideology retains a firm grip on society.

### Gender perspective

According to the US Department of State's [2022 Trafficking in Persons Report](#), whilst Mauritania is making progress in combatting human trafficking, child trafficking remains rife (p.378). Women and girls are commonly sex-trafficked, sometimes as brides, whereas boys are commonly forced to beg for food and money. A connected area of concern is child labor: Young boys are often sent to work on farms, whereas girls are employed as household workers, often in deplorable conditions ([Humanium, accessed 23 June 2023](#)).

Mauritania remains an unsafe place for converts from Islam to Christianity. It is unlikely that this situation will change in the near future.

## Trends analysis

### 1) The influence of radical Islam remains present in the country

The overall, political, economic and social situation in Mauritania makes the country conducive for radical Islam. The Mauritanian state has failed to tackle the practice of slavery, improve the economic situation of the majority of its citizens and establish a more responsive and accountable system of governance. This has created an environment conducive for the propagation of religious intolerance. Despite the government's collaboration and international reputation as a close ally of the West in the fight against terrorism and Islamic militancy, the situation in the country is complex and makes Mauritania a dangerous country in which to live as a Mauritanian Christian and difficult as a foreign Christian.

### 2) Political instability and poverty continue to be major issues

The lack of any strong institutions and democratic culture that respects the rights of citizens means that the chances for any improvement in the situation for Christians are very slim. The turbulence and political instability that characterizes the country's history does not bode well for the future, although the last transition of power went smoothly. The poverty of the country as well as the growing divisions over the issue of slavery could also exacerbate the situation. The instability in the region (especially in neighboring countries like Mali) which is fueled by the rise of Islamic militant groups like AQIM, also gives cause for concern about the future for Christians in Mauritania.

### 3) The number of Christians remains small

Overall, the signs are that Christians will keep facing pressure in the future: The situation for converts is not likely to improve, and Sub-Saharan migrants might well be forced out of the country due to the Arabization of the workforce. The number of Christians will most probably remain small for the next few years.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: World Politics Review, 2 July 2021 - <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29775/what-the-arrest-of-a-former-president-means-for-mauritania-politics>
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- Political and legal landscape: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-western-africa/mauritania/>
- Political and legal landscape: 20% - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/mauritania>
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- Religious landscape description: HRW 2021 Mauritania country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/mauritania>
- Economic landscape: MPPN, 13 March 2023 - <https://www.mppn.org/mauritania-launches-multidimensional-poverty-index/>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's - <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>
- Economic landscape: Global Partnership, accessed 23 June 2023 - <https://www.globalpartnership.org/results/stories-of-change/mauritania-distance-shouldnt-stand-between-girls-and-their-education>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Gender Data Portal 2023 - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/mauritania>
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## WWL 2024: Church information / Mauritania

### Christian origins

Mauritania was settled by Sub-Saharan peoples and by the Sanhajah Imazighen ('Berbers'). The region was the cradle of the Amazigh ('Berber') Almoravids, a puritanical 11th century Islamic reform movement that spread a 'puritan' form of Islam from the Sahara through to North Africa. No details are known about any presence of Christianity prior to this, but since some cities in Mauritania played an important role in trade between Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa, there must have been some sort of contact with Christians.

The first recorded Christian impact on Mauritania was in 1442 when Portuguese mariners conquered Cape Nouadhibou; six years later they founded the fort of Arguin, whence they derived gold, gum arabic and slaves. These same commodities later drew Spanish, Dutch and finally French traders to the coast. The French gained rule over much of the Saharan coast through European treaties early in the 19th century.

Mauritania became part of French West Africa in 1904. French colonial interests and control remained mostly limited to the coast and the Saharan trade routes. The European presence in Mauritania was more focused on business than on presenting the Christian faith. The Christian presence in Mauritania during the time of the French colonial rule was limited to resident Roman Catholic expatriates. Following independence from France in 1960, life for the few Christians in the country became very difficult, but the Roman Catholic Church founded a diocese in Nouakchott in 1965.

(Source: Pazzanita G A, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, p. 282.)

### Church spectrum today

Mauritania: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	5,300	47.7
Protestant	2,400	21.6
Independent	2,700	24.3
Unaffiliated	660	5.9
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b> <i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>	<b>11,060</b>	<b>99.6</b>

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

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox.  
**Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the

Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once.

Mauritania: Church movements	Christians	%
Evangelical movement	1,400	12.6
Renewalist movement	2,900	26.1

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

**Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

According to the World Christian Database (WCD), the majority of Christians in Mauritania are Roman Catholic. There is a small number of indigenous Christians with a Muslim background that have to live their faith in secrecy. There are also some non-denominational Christians from neighboring countries and beyond. Protestants are not as well-established as Roman Catholics in the country.

Dozens of nuns and priests in a handful of mission posts have found themselves widely accepted by the local population through their social commitment and support. Catholic church services are mainly held for migrant workers from neighboring countries like Guinea Bissau.

(Source: Pazzanita G A, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, p. 282.)

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Tribal and family ties are especially strict in the rural part of the country, but even in the capital and largest 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.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Roman Catholic expatriates from Sub-Saharan Africa make up the largest group, followed by Protestants and Evangelicals also from countries to the south of Mauritania. There is also a small Western Christian presence, but they are a very small percentage of the Christian population in the country. Ethnic African migrant Christians lead a precarious existence in the country due to the prevalence of ethnic prejudices and also the pressure that comes from the surrounding, very conservative, Islamic society.

### Historical Christian communities

This category of Christians does not exist in Mauritania.

### Converts to Christianity

Christian converts from a Muslim background are most exposed to targeted pressure and violence. They face great pressure from their immediate and extended family. In this nomadic society where communal interdependence and the extended family are necessary for one's survival, converts face a huge challenge to keep their Christian faith hidden from view. The hatred and false stereotypes that are propagated against Christians by Islamic groups affect most converts; they will lose their status in the community if their conversion becomes public knowledge.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This category of Christians does not exist in Mauritania.

## WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Mauritania

### Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

### Position on the World Watch List

Mauritania: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	72	23
WWL 2023	72	20
WWL 2022	70	23
WWL 2021	71	20
WWL 2020	68	24

In WWL 2024, Mauritania scored the same as in WWL 2023 (72 points) 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 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.

## Persecution engines

Mauritania: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Strong
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Islamic oppression (Very strong)

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 funding 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 / Ethno-religious hostility (Strong)

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 tribe 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 (Medium)

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 been focusing 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.

### Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)

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 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.

## Drivers of persecution

Mauritania: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG		STRONG	STRONG				MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Government officials	Strong		Strong					Medium	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Strong		Strong	Strong					
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong			Strong					
Violent religious groups	Strong		Medium	Medium					Medium
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong		Strong	Strong					
One's own (extended) family	Very strong			Strong					
Organized crime cartels or networks									Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Family (Very strong):** Mauritanian families are in general conservative and strictly Islamic. This attitude does not leave much space for differing views. Converts are very likely to face severe pressure.
- **Government officials (Strong):** The authorities at all levels are a principal driver since the state embraces Islam as its basic ideology.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Radical imams and Islamic teachers fuel prejudice and hatred towards Christians.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Strong):** Tribalism is still strong in Mauritania and tribal leaders will not allow any converts among their groups.

- **Ordinary citizens (Strong):** Influenced by the teaching of conservative imams, Mauritanian society does not allow fellow citizens to convert from Islam to Christianity.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** Islamic militants such as AQIM are particularly active in the eastern part of the country and form a threat to all Christians. In addition, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood have a growing influence, especially among the poor and younger generation in the south of the country.

#### Drivers of Clan oppression / Ethno-religious hostility

- **Family (Strong):** Family ties are very strong and the conversion from Islam to Christianity of a family member will be seen as a matter of immense shame for the family honor. Thus, family members will expel converts from their home or force them to recant their new faith.
- **Government officials (Strong):** There is a strong feeling among Mauritians to preserve their own ethnic groups. Government officials are part of this tendency and will try to protect their groups from Western/Christian influences.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Strong):** In the context of slavery and the prevalence of a caste system in Mauritania, the current situation is reinforced by and fused with religion. Conservative clan leaders are intent on preserving ethnic hierarchy and social order.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Tribal and Islamic practices are blended. Islamic preachers support the caste system and their ethnic groups are determined to keep their groups Islamic.
- **Ordinary citizens (Strong):** Tribal and ethnic group ties are seen as very important by Mauritanian society. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is seen as a breach of these ties and is thus opposed by society.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** These groups are often organized along tribal lines. They will try to maintain the Islamic and ethnic purity of the tribe, not allowing any space for converts from Islam to Christianity.

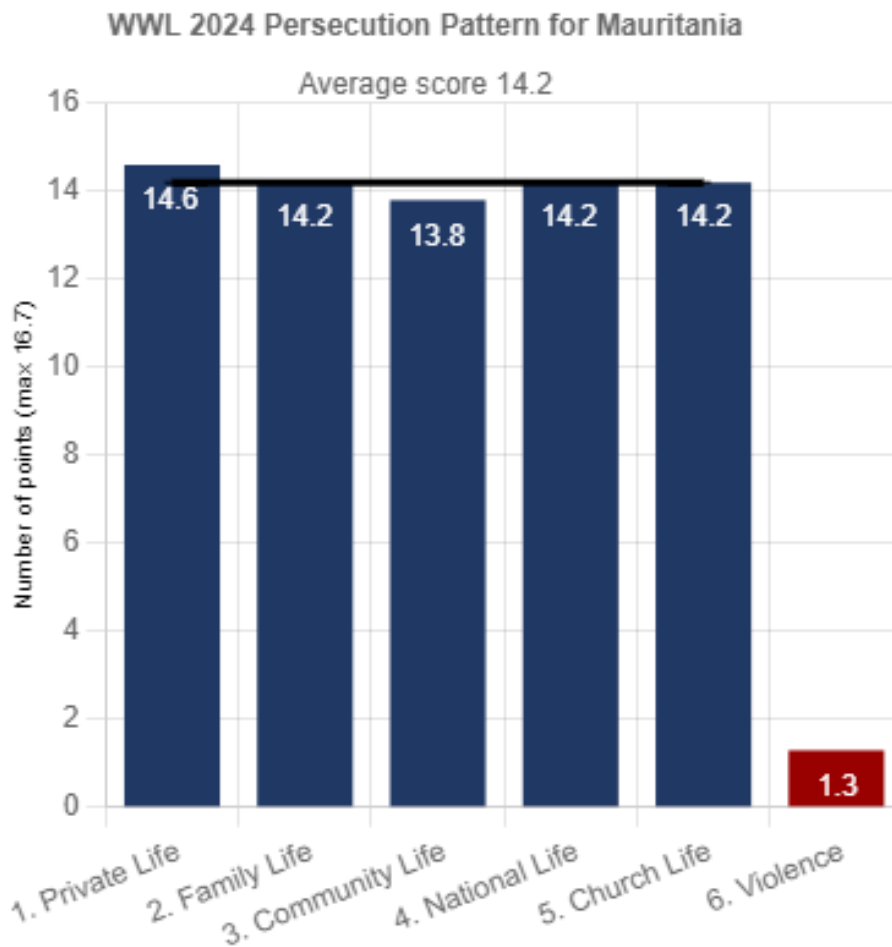
#### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Medium):** The government tries to maintain power at all costs, even if that means appeasing Islamic radicals by persecuting Christians. The tightened apostasy law is a clear example of this mechanism.

#### Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- **Government officials (Medium):** The authorities and those in power use the system for self-enrichment.
- **Organized crime networks (Medium):** Criminal networks and the role of the government are sometimes hard to distinguish, but they control most of the economy and permeate the country with a sense of hopelessness and maintain high levels of poverty. This poverty and endemic corruption contribute to persecution in that the rule of law is not followed, and Christians have little hope of obtaining stable employment and of earning an honest income.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** Radical Islamic groups gather financial support through carrying out criminal activities such as human trafficking and the smuggling of weapons. Christians, especially foreign Christians, are an easy target for kidnapping.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Mauritania shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at an extremely high level (14.2 points), increasing from 14.0 in WWL 2023.
- All spheres of life show extreme levels of pressure. In Mauritania's tribal culture, leaving Islam is not only religious betrayal, but also betrayal of the tribe and family. There is no room to publicly speak about Christianity, nor is their official recognition of converts from Islam to Christianity.
- The score for violence remained at 1.3 in WWL 2024. The low score may well be partly due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

### **Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)**

Displaying a cross or other symbol is highly risky for converts from Islam to Christianity, as it will be understood as a clear sign of apostasy. Expatriate Christians, especially those from a Sub-Saharan background, are likely to face discrimination and abuse if publicly identifiable as Christian.

### **Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.75 points)**

Expatriate Christians have more freedom in this regard than converts, but revealing your faith can lead to persecution for both categories of Christians.

### **Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.75 points)**

Discussing your faith with members of the wider society is dangerous for all Christians. Converts are likely to be accused of apostasy, while expatriate Christians will be accused of proselytism. Christian expatriates can only discuss their faith with other Christian expatriates at home or in a church gathering.

### **Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)**

Conversion from Islam is legally proscribed and any views perceived to be critical of Islam could legally entail the death-penalty. While this law has largely been regarded as symbolic, it still remains a significant threat to Christians from a Muslim background.

### **Block 1: Additional information**

For non-Mauritanian Christians who have a Christian background, there is relative freedom for private worship. However, converts from Islam risk significant pressure and persecution if their conversion is revealed through acts of private worship. The possession of Christian materials and any expression of their Christian faith could trigger a hostile reaction from members of their immediate family as well as the community. This is particularly the case for converts located outside the capital.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)**

Baptism of converts has to take place in absolute secrecy as baptism is a very clear sign of both conversion and proselytism.

**Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)**

Children of Christian parents have to attend Islamic classes at school. Converts also find it very difficult to mark major milestones in their life with Christian ceremonies and are often pressured into participating in Islamic rites.

**Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)**

Children of Christian parents are likely to face discrimination and harassment from their peers. The various forms of harassment often have a racial and ethnic side to them.

**Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (3.25 points)**

In Mauritania, men commonly divorce their wives and conversion from Islam to Christianity is more than enough reason to divorce a wife. It is likely that family members will force the husband to divorce his wife if he converts to Christianity. However, because conversions are kept secret, it does not occur often.

**Block 2: Additional information**

Christian parents find it difficult to raise their children in accordance with their religious beliefs. This is a problem for both Mauritanian converts and foreign Christians, especially those from Sub-Saharan African countries. Unlike converts, expatriate Christians have relative freedom to conduct marriages, baptisms and funerals with Christian rites.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.50 points)**

There is a high level of social hostility towards both converts as well as expatriate Sub-Saharan African Christians. However, this harassment is also related to ethnicity and racism as Western Christians are generally treated well.

**Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.50 points)**

Converts from Islam to Christianity often have to live their faith in secrecy and are hence obliged to take part in Islamic or local religious practices (e.g. Ramadan).

**Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.50 points)**

If the faith of a convert is known, it is highly likely that he or she will be ostracized by the surrounding community if they do not recant.

**Block 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (3.50 points)**

Known converts would most probably be heavily discriminated against and be unable to run a business, especially since Mauritanian society is steeped in corruption and clientelism. Expatriate Christians from a Sub-Saharan background are both discriminated against because of the color of their skin as well as their faith.

**Block 3: Additional information**

Christians with a Muslim background are frequently excluded from the benefits of communal living, which are key to survival in Mauritania, especially in rural areas. Converts are at times denied the assistance and cooperation of the community and also face exclusion from accessing communal resources and forums. This situation is exacerbated when it is linked with racial and ethnic discrimination which is deeply rooted in the country. Children of migrant workers are the most affected in this regard since they are denied admission to some schools. Furthermore, as most local schooling is Islamic, children from Christian converts are inherently at a disadvantage if they let their faith be known. Both converts and migrant Christians also suffer from discrimination in the job market and in the work place.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)**

Mauritania is an Islamic republic, and even though it is party to major international human rights treaties that enshrine freedom of religion, it still has a criminal law that sanctions capital punishment for "apostasy".

**Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (4.00 points)**

There are only a few Catholic church buildings in the country, with only some churches showing a cross on the outside. Churches and Christian organizations have to operate carefully and will try to prevent drawing any negative attention.

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.75 points)**

Christians have to operate carefully in Mauritanian society. Criticism of the government or Islam is impossible without punishment.

**Block 4.13: Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups. (3.75 points)**

Blasphemy is a very sensitive subject, with the blasphemy law only recently being tightened even further. Although the death penalty is largely symbolic, the blasphemy law is regularly used against those allegedly being opposed to Islam or having insulted Islam's prophet, Muhammad. In addition, an accusation of blasphemy can easily lead to mob violence against the accused. The

possible accusation of blasphemy is hence creating additional pressure and fear among Mauritanian and expatriate Christians alike.

#### **Block 4: Additional information**

Anyone working for the government is required to profess Islam and participate in state religious events. Expatriate Christians, especially those from a Sub-Saharan African background, frequently face overt discrimination. In recent times there has been a strong anti-immigrant campaign. These racist and xenophobic attacks often take on anti-Christian themes as well. The overall environment at the national level is such that many converts are forced to keep their faith a secret. It is virtually impossible for anyone to be visibly Christian and participate in the affairs of the nation openly.

### **Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere**

**Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (4.00 points)**

Only the Roman Catholic church has visible Church buildings. Some other denominations are allowed to meet in one of the Roman Catholic church buildings; others meet in a house or hall. Building new church buildings is more or less impossible.

**Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.75 points)**

Due to the legacy of French colonial rule, only the Roman Catholic Church has legal status. All other forms of Christianity are not allowed any legal status, but the Catholic Church does allow Evangelicals to use a back room within the main church compound for worship in the diocese of Nouakchott.

**Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.75 points)**

All Christians know that no public Christian activities are allowed outside the very confined church location. With the exception of a very few events such as an Easter sunrise service outside the city, there are no known church functions outside their walls. Therefore, the Church in Mauritania is forced to be out of sight and operate in the shadows.

**Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (3.75 points)**

As proselytism is strictly forbidden, expatriate churches are not allowed to welcome a Muslim inside the church buildings, let alone integrate a convert from Islam to Christianity in their communities.

#### **Block 5: Additional information**

Christians from a Muslim background gather in secret, fearing that they may be being watched. Foreign Christians are only allowed to meet in authorized places of worship - although there are

frequent home-meetings that are not hindered unless the music and preaching is too loud.

## Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

### 1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.

Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.

### 2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

### 3. The use of symbolic numbers

- In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10\* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100\* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

### 4. The symbol “x” in the table

- This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.



<b>Mauritania: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire</b>	<b>WWL 2024</b>	<b>WWL 2023</b>
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	x
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	2	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10 *	10 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	0
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	x	x

Violence against Christians has remained at a very low level. There are two reasons for this: Firstly, all converts know the consequences if their faith is discovered, and so do other Christians if they do not operate carefully (e.g. abstaining from evangelism). Thus, by keeping a low profile, Christians avoid provoking violent reactions. Secondly, it is difficult to get confirmed reports of incidents out of the country; incidents are not always verifiable when converts from Islam to Christianity in Mauritania face violent persecution at the hands of their (extended) family members, neighbors and society at large.

A similar number of incidents were reported during the WWL 2024 reporting period as compared to the previous reporting period. Some Mauritanian Christians were questioned and intimidated, and some had to relocate outside the country following incidents. Outside of the WWL 2024 reporting period (which ended 30 September 2023), more than fifteen Mauritanian

leaders and Christians were arrested at the end of 2023 following the posting of a baptism video on social media (see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights*).

### 5 Year trends

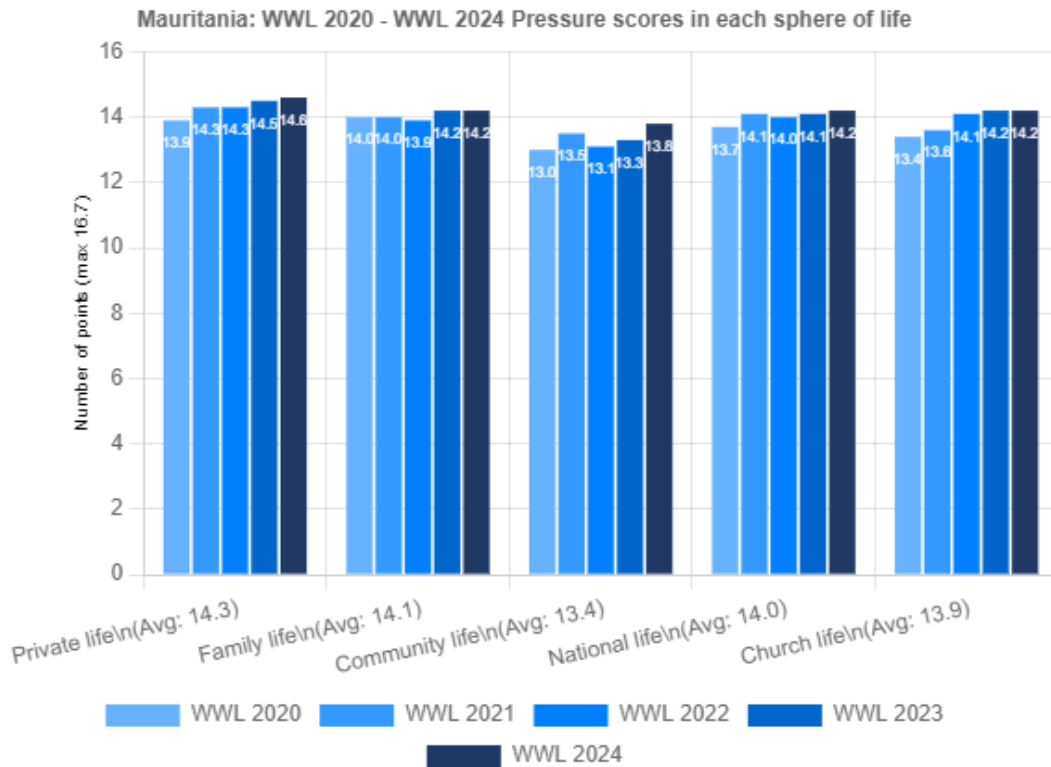
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Mauritania: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	14.2
2023	14.0
2022	13.9
2021	13.9
2020	13.6

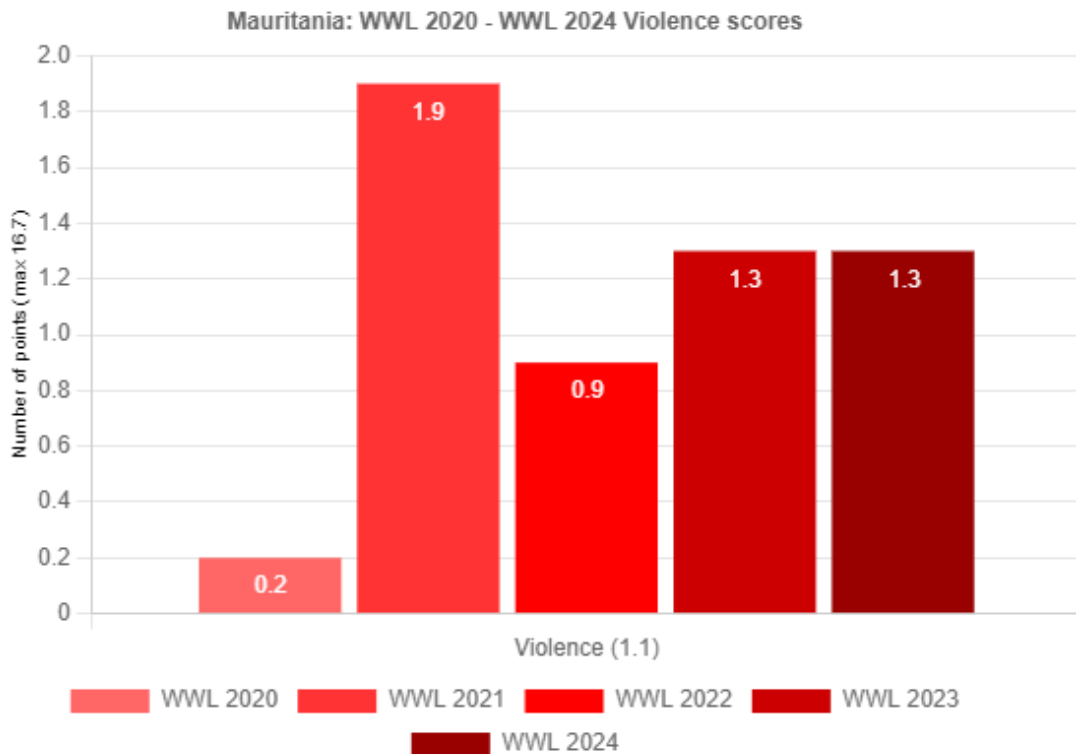
The table above shows a gradual increase in average pressure. After rising from 13.6 points in WWL 2020, it seemed that the average pressure on Christians was leveling off at the extreme level of 13.9/14.0 points. However, in WWL 2024 there was a further rise to 14.2 points.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The very high and extremely high levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* are indicative of the pressure local Mauritanian convert Christians face from both family and the government.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As the chart above shows, the scores for violence against Christians have remained more or less stable at a very low or low level. However, the low scoring may well be partly due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced marriage
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Within Mauritania's tribal society, women are subject to the authority of their fathers and husbands. As such, the most vulnerable Christian females are those who have converted from Islam, the majority religion. Leaving Islam means disregarding a father or a husband and bringing

shame upon the family. This can have severe consequences, especially since most women and girls are (financially) totally dependent on their families. When it is discovered that a woman or girl is Christian, she may be attacked, deprived of food, bullied, and put under house arrest in order to keep her isolated.

Traditional marriage practices place converts in a particularly vulnerable position. In Mauritania, one's first spouse is generally chosen by the parents, and this selection often happens before a girl comes of age. As such, unmarried female converts might find themselves forced into a marriage with a Muslim man to keep them under the influence of Islamic family life. In general, most women do not have a choice in marriage. Should she refuse, she risks being shunned by her family and friendship circle. A regional expert summarizes: "Christian girls are sometimes forced into marriage to Muslims in order to force them to renounce their Christian faith."

In this culture, a girl typically stays in the family home and does not leave her family until she is married; otherwise, she may be labeled a prostitute. Married female converts can easily be divorced and end up with no means to survive. In general, women can be easily divorced, and polygamy is still practiced. Making it additionally challenging, Muslim women (also Christians from a Muslim background) cannot legally marry a Christian man.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced divorce; Imprisonment by government
Security	Forced to flee town/country; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Male converts to Christianity bring shame upon their (extended) family. As a result, they are most likely to be ostracized, thus losing respect and status in society and among their friends. In many cases, converts are expelled from their homes, or physically abused. Sometimes, converts feel forced to flee their town or country to avoid being forced to perform Muslim rites; if it is confirmed that they have converted, charges of apostasy can be brought in a religious court. If their faith becomes known, converts are likely to have to flee their village or city to escape serious consequences.

Christian men, especially those involved in church leadership or any form of missionary activity, are at risk of imprisonment, including long prison sentences and high fines. Church leaders can also be subject to extra surveillance.

By excluding ethnic Africans from finding work or by forcing migrant workers to pay high fees for staying in the country, Christian men among them can be easily put under pressure to leave Mauritania. This is all part of a strong “Arabization” movement and many Sub-Saharan African Christians do leave as a result of this, or live very difficult lives.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Apart from the Christian minority, there is also a very small but growing Shia Muslim minority in Mauritania. While the government has good ties with Iran and did not target this community in the past, Sunni religious leaders have been denouncing this minority group and calling for restrictive measures to be taken against Shia Muslims. As a result, a Shia religious center was closed down in 2018.

Not only non-Sunni religious minorities, but also those striving for (secular) change are facing strong (societal) opposition. According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2021 Mauritania](#), p.5):

- "On April 21 [2021], many on social media criticized and threatened four persons who participated in a video program called Al-Matrush (a local expression meaning 'the intrusive'). During the program, a young woman challenged existing religious norms and talked openly about premarital sex, what women should look for in a partner, and why it was wrong to objectify women. Many in the public called for the four participants to be arrested and tried under the country's sharia-based criminal code. Authorities detained the four participants on April 24, but the prosecutor decided not to file charges, and the four were released on April 27. Program organizers halted production in response to police warnings and societal pressure and the program had not restarted by the end of the year."

Previously, in February 2020, "police arrested 15 individuals in connection with a meeting of AREM, an association that promotes a secular state. Although several of those arrested were released after questioning, eight were charged with blasphemy and other offenses related to holding unauthorized meetings and using social media to attack Islam. ... All eight were fined and sentenced to various prison terms." ([IRFR 2020](#) Mauritania, p.3).

Earlier on, the case of Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'khaitir in 2019 clearly showed that even criticism of Islam, while striving for racial equality can lead to years of imprisonment (see above: Technological landscape). Next to atheists or non-Sunni religious groups, there is also no place in Mauritanian society for the LGBTQIA+ community. In May 2022, the police arrested six young persons for performing "unnatural acts"; however, they were quickly released and no charges were brought against them ([IRFR 2022 Mauritania](#), p.6).

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Islamic oppression

*Islamic oppression* is likely to continue as a major Persecution engine in Mauritania. The tightening of the blasphemy law in 2018 indicates a deteriorating situation and several incidents involving Christians took place during 2020-2023. The influence of radical Islamic groups appears to remain strong, thus likely making the situation for Christians difficult, even in the long term.

### **Clan oppression / Ethno-religious hostility**

Although the country is urbanizing and the arrival of the Internet and social media has brought change, it is not likely that tribal attitudes will alter in the short term; hence *Clan oppression* is likely to continue. Racism and *Ethno-religious hostility* will most probably continue to exist too, especially now the government is actively working towards Arabization of the workforce.

### **Organized corruption and crime**

The migrant Christian community is in a state of crisis. New laws are making it hard to stay in the country, few migrant Christians can find work and few also have the necessary resources to stay in the country legally. Some have chosen to stay and pay extra bribes, while others have chosen to leave.

### **Dictatorial paranoia**

The current government is determined to hold on to power and tries to shore up its legitimacy among Islamic groups by suppressing Christians and Christian/Western influence. Christianity is seen as a possible threat to the power of the ruling social class - an attitude which is not likely to change.

## **External Links - Persecution Dynamics**

- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2021 Mauritania - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mauritania/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2020 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mauritania/>

## **Further useful reports**

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Mauritania>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.