

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
20

Mauritania



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LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

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

Quick facts

LEADER

President Mohamed Cheikh el Ghazouani

POPULATION

4,902,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

11,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	11,000	0.2
Muslims	4,865,000	99.2
Ethno-religionists	20,100	0.4
Agnostics	4,800	0.1

Source²

Mauritania is one of the world's poorest countries, despite being rich in mineral resources. Culture is traditional and tribal at its core. The continued practice of slavery is one of the [major causes](#) of social division and acrimony; white Moors and Berbers are of Arab descent, while most slaves, called Haratines or black Moors, are of ethnic African descent. Almost all political and economic power is in the hands of the white Moors, which means the majority of society (70%) remains significantly marginalized. Violent Islamist militants are particularly active in the eastern border regions of the country. Kidnapping by militants or other criminal groups is a risk throughout the country, especially for foreigners, although the west of the country around the capital Nouakchott is generally safer.

The country's full name is the Islamic Republic of Mauritania; most Mauritania are Sunni Muslim. The influence of radical Islamic groups is strong. Christianity is viewed as a condemnable western influence and government hostility towards Christians, especially converts, is high. In theory, the punishment for leaving Islam is the death sentence, though there are no known examples of this being applied in recent years. 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 Mauritania, 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.

How the situation varies by region

Tribal and family ties are especially strict in rural areas, but even in the capital city, Nouakchott, the pressure on Christians can be high. Generally, the pressure is lower in the southern border region with Senegal. Violent Islamist groups, like 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.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Roman Catholic expatriates from sub-Saharan Africa make up the largest group, followed by Protestants, and Evangelicals from countries south of Mauritania. There is a small Western Christian presence. African migrant Christians lead a precarious existence due both to ethnic prejudice and pressure related to the Islamic extremism in the country.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

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

Non-traditional Christian communities

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



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Non-Muslims experience violations, particularly at the hands of society and Islamist groups. Large numbers of Mauritians have joined violent radical Islamist groups in North Africa, as well as in Syria and Iraq. While the government attempts to counter Islamist militancy and extremism, it simultaneously tightened the apostasy and blasphemy law in 2018. Converts from Islam to Christianity suffer the most severe violations from family and society.

Clan oppression/ethno-religious hostility:

Tribal and racial tensions are intertwined in this very conservative country. Conversion to Christianity is seen as “dishonorable” to society and results in harassment or violence. Slavery continues to exist and is linked both to ethnicity and religion. The campaign against slavery has triggered a hostile reaction from Islamists in the country. Christian sub-Saharan Africans living in the country face a mixture of both religious and racial discrimination.

Organized corruption and crime:

Tribal affiliation, religious and personal relationships are very important in Mauritanian society. Nepotism, clientelism, and other forms of corruption are widespread. A small number of powerful businessmen related to white Moor tribes control most of the economy. Journalists investigating corruption involving state authorities are often intimidated, detained and accused of defamation (BTI Mauritania 2020, p.12). Christians have little hope of obtaining stable employment or earning an honest income in such a climate.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Mauritania’s government has been struggling to maintain stability and legitimacy. As such, reducing “Christianizing” influences is often used as a political expedient to shore up government power and popularity. Christianity is often equated with Westernization and colonialism, and is viewed by the government as a foreign threat.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Within Mauritania’s tribal society, women are subject to the authority of fathers and husbands, making female converts the most vulnerable. They may be deprived of food, bullied, put under house arrest, or forced into excruciating servitude. The presence of modern-day slavery makes ruthless detention and exploitation of female converts more likely – and very hidden. Most women do not have a choice in marriage and may be forced to marry a Muslim man. Married female converts can easily be divorced with no means to survive, and polygamy is still practiced.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied food or water
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Male Christian converts bring shame upon their family. They are likely to be ostracized, expelled from their home, and physically abused. Some choose to flee; if conversion is confirmed, charges of apostasy can be brought in a religious court. Some have also been imprisoned for anti-terrorism and cybercrime offenses, charged for “undermining national security by insulting

Islam and threatening Mauritania’s sacred principles”. Guilty verdicts can result in long prison sentences and high fines. A strong “Arabization” movement means many sub-Saharan African Christians are pressured to leave or face many difficulties.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	20	72
2022	23	70
2021	20	71
2020	24	68
2019	25	67

Mauritania’s score increased by two points compared to WWL 2022. This was mainly caused by a slight increase in reported pressure. Average pressure in virtually all spheres of life remains extremely high, mainly due to the very severe pressure that converts from Islam to Christianity face in the country.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

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

- Baptisms can only be carried out in secret, and many converts from Islam are reluctant to be baptized, fearing discovery and charges of apostasy being brought against them.
- Converts that are discovered by their families often feel pressured into leaving the country.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	2	10*	7
2022	1	10*	0

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

Private life

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

Family life

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

Community life

There is extreme communal pressure against Mauritians who do not follow Sunni Islam. Violations can take the form of ostracization, social discrimination, economic exclusion or even violence.

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

National life

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

Church life

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

International obligations & rights violated

Mauritania has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights 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 face the threat of forced marriage to Muslim men, even before they become of age, to pressure them to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christian children must attend Islamic religious classes at public school and face discrimination and pressure because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christian converts are excluded from accessing communal resources and their businesses boycotted (ICCPR Art. 26 and ICESCR Art. 11)



Situation of other religious minorities

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



Open Doors in Mauritania

Open Doors is supporting the Church in North Africa through:

- Training
- Literature distribution
- Socio-economic development
- Advocacy

Open Doors raises prayer support for believers in difficult situations.

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
