

World Watch Research

# Mauritania: Background Information

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## Contents

Copyright and sources .....	1
Map of country .....	2
Recent history .....	2
Political and legal landscape .....	3
Religious landscape.....	5
Economic landscape.....	6
Social and cultural landscape.....	8
Technological landscape .....	10
Security situation .....	11
Christian origins .....	12
Church spectrum today.....	12
Further useful reports.....	13
External Links .....	13

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Mauritania: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
4,994,000	11,000	0.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## 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 (Freedom House, [Global Freedom Index 2023 Mauritania/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 started 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](#)). 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](#)).

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. Ghazouani was re-elected in June 2024, with 56% of the vote, defeating anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid who received 22% ([France24, 30 June 2024](#)).

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.

### Further reports

- **Middle East Concern** ([MEC Mauritania profile](#), accessed 8 August 2024): "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".
- **Economist Intelligence Unit** ([EIU Democracy Index 2023](#)): Mauritania is classified as a 'hybrid regime', having been promoted from the category 'authoritarian'.
- **Humanists International** ([2020 Freedom of Thought Report](#), last updated 20 September 2020): Mauritania is described 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".
- **Fragile State Index** ([FSI 2024 Mauritania](#)): Political indicators show improvement over the previous years, as well as the Security Apparatus indicator. Especially the category 'Human rights' improved, although decreasing again in 2024. Nonetheless, indicator scores stayed high thus indicating that political freedom remains restricted. In addition, "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 2023 Mauritania](#)) ranking #151 out of 177 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	11,000	0.2
Muslim	4,956,000	99.2
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	20,700	0.4
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	510	0.0
Atheist	340	0.0
Agnostic	5,100	0.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to WCD 2024 estimates, 99.2% 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 2023 Mauritania](#), p.6). This can be understood as an effort to curb the influence of Wahhabism.

According to Middle East Concern ([MEC Mauritania profile](#), accessed 8 August 2024):

- "Christians face severe restrictions in practice. While expatriate Christians are permitted to wor-

ship, 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](#)). A similar incident occurred in July 2023 when "a 19-year-old female student was accused of authoring text directed at the Prophet Muhammad, which police said they believed to be blasphemous" ([IRFR 2023 Mauritania](#), p.4). She was arrested after widespread public outrage and remains in pre-detention, while the government has been accused by Islamic religious leaders and Islamist politicians of being irresolute. At one hand, her case highlights the strong influence of radical Islamic thinking in society, and on the other shows how the government has to balance between domestic radical Islamic voices and international Western influence to adhere to human rights ([Global Voices, 29 August 2023](#)).

## Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook Mauritania](#) (accessed 8 August 2024) and [World Bank Mauritania data](#) (accessed 8 August 2024):

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$5,300 (2022 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 10.8%, with youth unemployment being twice as high at 23%
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 31.8% (2019 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 [Macro Poverty Outlook Mauritania](#) (April 2024):

- **Economic growth:** "Economic growth is estimated at 3.4 percent in 2023 (0.7 percent in per capita terms) down from 6.4 percent in 2022 (3.7 percent in per capita terms) reflecting a significant contraction in fish production on the supply side and lower public investment and fish exports on the demand side."
- **Inflation:** "Inflation decreased driven by lower food and oil prices, reaching 1.6 percent (y/y) in December 2023, compared with 11 percent (y/y) in December 2022."
- **Account deficit:** "The fiscal balance recorded a deficit of 2.5 percent of GDP in 2023, compared with 3.7 percent of GDP in 2022. This improvement was driven by a fall in capital expenditure to 6.7 percent of GDP in 2023 from 11.3 percent of GDP in 2022, offsetting the decline in commodity revenues and higher wages and compensation resulting from the public sector salary increase in January 2023. The debt-to-GDP ratio rose by 1.3pp to 48.6 percent of GDP in 2023, due to lower nominal growth and the depreciation of the exchange rate at the end of 2023."
- **Economic outlook:** "The medium-term outlook is positive with growth projected at 3.8 percent in 2024 (1.1 percent in per capita terms) and to hover around 5.4 percent in 2025-2026. The launch of gas production in the second half of 2025 will boost growth while providing sufficient fiscal margin to finance development projects and support social protection reforms. Higher private investments, an improved net external position, and sustained private demand will also support growth. Average inflation will fall further and reach 2.5 percent in 2024, as external pressures ease, and stabilize around 2 percent in 2025 and 2026."

#### Further reports

- **World Bank 2023 World by Income report** (accessed 8 August 2024): The Mauritanian economy is ranked in the lower middle income category.
- **Fragile State Index (FSI 2024 Mauritania)**: There are improvements in the 'Economy' indicator, with 'Human Flight and Brain Drain' decreasing too (although remaining quite high). However, 'Economic Inequality' is on the rise.
- Bertelsmann Transformation Index ([BTI Mauritania Report 2024](#)): "The Mauritanian economy exhibits a strong tendency toward oligopoly. A small group of businessmen and their families control the majority of large firms, establishing an oligopolistic position in sectors such as banking, fishery, public infrastructure and construction, the import-export of consumer goods and foodstuffs, telecommunications, and insurance. A 2020 World Bank report highlighted the presence of "implicit cartels that raise input costs and limit the availability of diverse products," while advising the government to diminish their influence" (page 21).

#### 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 Human Development Report Mauritania](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024). 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](#) (accessed 8 August 2024):

- **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 descent.
- **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:** 1.9% (2024 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 57.7% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 3.84%
- **Fertility rate:** 3.4 children born per woman (2024 est.)
- **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 14 years of age - makes up 35.7% of the population, making it another African country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities
- **IDPs/Refugees:** In 2023, Mauritania hosted 104,000 refugees from Mali. In addition, there are 26,000 Sahrawis living in Mauritania, who originally come from Western Sahara.
- **Life expectancy:** 65.9 years on average; women (68.5 years), men (63.4 years).
- **Education:** Mauritanians enjoy 9 years of schooling on average (2020).

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Mauritania](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Mauritania ranked #164 out of 193 countries. The assessment of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a low score of 0.540, 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 0.874, 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 2024).
- **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 2024) 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 2024 Mauritania](#)). The low literacy and life expectancy rate 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's [Macro Poverty Outlook Mauritania](#) (April 2024): "The US \$3.65-a-day poverty rate is expected to slightly increase from 27.7 percent in 2022 to 27.9 percent in 2023".

## 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](#), accessed 8 August 2024).

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 [Datareportal Digital 2024: Mauritania](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 44.4% penetration The low level of internet access, especially when compared with other North-African countries, is indicative of the development challenges Mauritania faces.
- **Social media usage:** 25.1% of the total population. According to [Napoleon Cat \(July 2024\)](#), the majority of Facebook users are men, making up 63.9% of the user group.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 129.6% of the total population. According to Georgetown ([GIWPS Mauritania profile](#), accessed 8 August 2024), 68% of women used a cell phone as of 2023; this falls behind the country average, indicating a gender gap.

According to Freedom House's [Global Freedom Index 2024 Mauritania](#):

- Mauritania is rated as "partly free".
- "Mauritania has a vibrant media landscape, with several privately owned newspapers, television stations, and radio stations in operation. ... However, "journalists risk arrest for reporting on sensitive topics and many self-censor. ... The 2021 law on national symbols prohibits "attacks on the authority of the state and the honor of the citizen," including via personal communications. Individuals have faced reprisals for expressing views critical of the government on social media, including termination of employment from government agencies."

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Mauritania #33 out of 180 countries in its [World Press Freedom Index 2023](#), a strong increase from #86 in 2023 and #97 in the 2022 index (#97). There is no clear reason provided for the increase. RSF states:

- "Since the decriminalization of press offences in 2011, journalists have worked in a less oppressive – but financially precarious – environment. ... Mauritania is multicultural and multiethnic, but members of the Moorish ethnic group control most media, which impacts content diversity. The media are reluctant to take on issues involving marital rape, sexuality and slavery, as well as corruption, the military, Islam and inequality between communities. ... Journalists are rarely the victims of physical violence, but they may be subjected to verbal attacks and harassment campaigns on social media. While reporters can move freely throughout most

of the country, some military zones near the eastern and northern borders are difficult to access without special authorisation."

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. However, according to a recent report, Mauritania's strategy of preventing radicalization by engaging in ideological dialogue with jihadists has, together with other measures, has 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.

## 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	5,200	47.3
Protestant	2,400	21.8
Independent	2,800	25.5
Unaffiliated	700	6.4
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>11,100</b>	<b>100.9</b>
Evangelical movement	1,400	12.7
Pentecostal-Charismatic	2,800	25.5

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

**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. **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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

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.)

## 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/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

## External Links

- Recent history: Global Freedom Index 2023 Mauritania/A1 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2023>
- 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: EIU Democracy Index 2023 - <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf>
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- Political and legal landscape: 20% - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/mauritania>
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