

World  
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Research

## Maldives: Full Country Dossier

December 2022



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

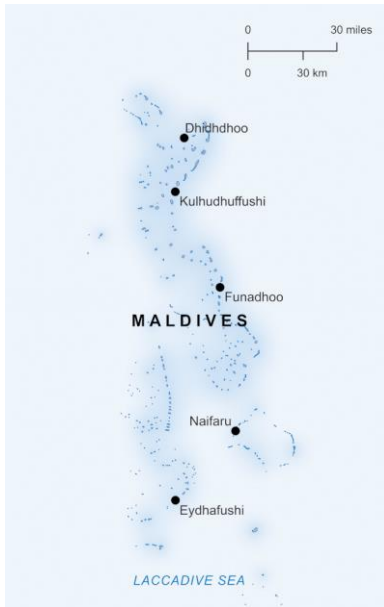
# WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Maldives

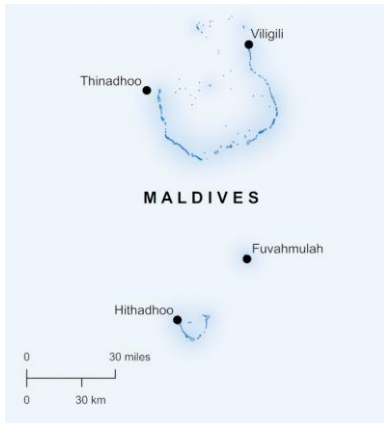
## Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Maldives: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
541,000	Hundreds	OD estimate

## Map of country





Maldives: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	77	15
WWL 2022	77	16
WWL 2021	77	15
WWL 2020	78	14
WWL 2019	78	14

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Maldives: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Organized crime cartels or networks
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Political parties, Organized crime cartels or networks
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Political parties, 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

The Maldives has one of the highest population densities worldwide, especially on its main island, Malé. The close-knit, homogeneous communities serve as natural watchdogs for any deviation of its members, which naturally includes religious choice. Being a citizen of the Maldives means being a Muslim. Conversion to Christianity can thus easily result in being reported to Muslim leaders or the authorities. Apart from the conservative Islamic attitudes of the general population, the Maldives also struggles with radicalized segments of society, some of them battle-hardened from fighting in places like Syria. Expatriate Christians, most of them

working in the tourist sector and coming from India and Sri Lanka, are closely watched as well, making Christian fellowship very difficult. While many of them left the Maldives when tourism was closed down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the gradual opening up again, they are returning, too.

## Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Maldives 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)

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

- If their new faith is discovered, Christian converts are stripped of their citizenship, isolated from the society and punished with loss of state benefits for violating Sharia (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 26)
- Non-Muslims living in or visiting the country are prohibited from openly expressing their religious beliefs, especially with Maldivians (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- There are no churches in Maldives and any non-Muslim rite is prohibited (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christian expatriates' private worship meetings are strictly monitored and controlled by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian women are harassed or face violence if they do not abide by traditional Islamic dress code (ICCPR Art. 18 and CEDAW Art. 2)

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

No details can be published due to security concerns.

## Specific examples of positive developments

None

## 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>



# WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Maldives

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp.244-245)	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	7 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12651486">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12651486</a>	7 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries, Maldives not included	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/home.html?cb=00000">https://bti-project.org/en/home.html?cb=00000</a>	
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/maldives/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/maldives/</a>	7 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/maldives">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/maldives</a>	7 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries, Maldives not included	EIU 2021	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	3 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Maldives not included	Democracy Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/maldives/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/maldives/freedom-world/2022</a>	7 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report – covering 70 countries, Maldives not included	Freedom on the Net 2021	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/maldives">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/maldives</a>	7 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#mv">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#mv</a>	7 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/country/maldives">https://rsf.org/en/country/maldives</a>	7 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/mdv">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/mdv</a>	7 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/MDV">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/MDV</a>	8 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/maldives/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/maldives/</a>	7 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, Maldives not included	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/maldives/overview#1">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/maldives/overview#1</a>	7 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57bar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=MDV">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57bar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=MDV</a>	7 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp.10-11)	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook">https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook</a>	7 June 2022

## Recent history

The more than 1,000 islands making up the Maldives are a politically divided country. After the ousting of the first democratically elected president, [Mohamed Nasheed](#), in February 2012 (Washington Post, 12 April 2012), his successors frequently reiterated the importance of Islam for the country and their plans to promote the religion. The leaders' intention to protect the country from becoming less than 100% Islamic is the ideological key for understanding the Maldives. Although the surprise presidential victory of opposition politician Ibrahim Solih in September 2018 did not change this goal, it definitely changed the way the government communicates. It also brought back former President Mohamed Nasheed, who has been made Speaker of the parliament. On 6 May 2021, a [bomb attack](#) close to his house seriously wounded him (more on this below, see: *Political and legal landscape*), reminding everyone how violent

Maldivian politics can be (AP News, 7 May 2021). Former President Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom, who is now in opposition, continues to attack the government with a fierce anti-India campaign, adding to an already politically volatile situation.

The government has taken on a style of communication which differs starkly from the previous administration's and pretends more openness; however, when the need arises, it will not hesitate to brush up on its Islamic credentials, as the surprising and quick closing of the NGO "Maldives Democracy Network" in November 2019 showed. Likewise, President Solih confirmed that the [protection of "religion unity"](#) (sic!) will remain a top priority under his government (Sun Maldives, 11 November 2020). Two further examples of this were: i) A bill aiming to [stop the mockery of religion](#) (i.e., of Islam), which was discussed in August 2021 in parliament (Sun MV, 24 August 2021), and ii) The order to [block webpages](#) promoting any religion other than Islam (The Times of Addu, 30 November 2021).

The small Christian minority needs to be very careful not to arouse any attention, which is also true for the larger group of Christian migrant workers, who mainly serve in the hospitality sector, which had been hit very hard by the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore fair to say that Christians are struggling on many fronts at the present time.

## Political and legal landscape

Politics in the Maldives always carries religious undertones; it would seem that Islam has to be defended or promoted in every possible way. As politics are often family business, rifts, changing coalitions and surprise political moves are quite normal. Especially in recent years, it has not been unusual for a minister to lose his job for a variety of reasons, including alleged treason. This points to another issue which Maldivian politics is facing - the paranoia of its leaders, no matter who is ruling. Staying in power seems to be a high priority, for which all means are used. This was shown again in the presidential election campaign in 2018, which was fought as a battle against all forms of opposition - both real and perceived. The small Christian minority has virtually no room to breathe under such pressure.

The Maldives has been a land in turmoil in recent years (excluding the islands used as tourist resorts). Civil liberties are becoming increasingly restricted, including media and social media, as shown by the [killing](#) of well-known blogger Yameen Rasheed in April 2017 in the capital Malé (New York Times, 23 April 2017), the closing of the NGO "Maldives Democracy Network" in November 2019 and the suspension of English-language news site "Maldives Independent" at the end of January 2020, although the latter was not due to government action. Given that the government's goal of protecting Islam remains unchanged, it is plain that the situation for religious minorities, especially Christians, remains difficult.

President Solih's MDP party won the elections in April 2019 by a [two-thirds majority in parliament](#), with a voter turnout of 80% (Maldives Independent, 7 April 2019). Solih was quoted as saying: The fact that "our campaign was issue-oriented and not based on hatred and narrow divisions is a win for our young democracy. That our government did not hinder those candidates with whom we did not agree is a big win for the country". However, there are considerable challenges facing Solih and everyone who may be interested in bringing change. This was illustrated by the bomb attack in May 2021: Former President Nasheed had returned to the

country from his London exile in 2019, after his party won an overwhelming election victory. On 6 May 2021, a bomb outside his home exploded as he stepped into his car. The 53 year-old suffered serious injury and had to undergo emergency surgery in Germany. While the motives for the attack are still unclear, Nasheed has always been very outspoken against radical Islamic groups in the Maldives. At the same time, he had just announced the publication of a list of politicians involved in the country's largest [corruption scandal](#) revolving around the Tourism Agency (Al-Jazeera, 8 May 2021), so the attack could also have been connected to domestic politics. However, both former President Mohamed Nasheed and police investigators have concluded that [Islamist groups](#) were behind the bomb attack targeting him at his home (Associated Press, 26 July 2021).

Another challenge the government is facing is fierce opposition by former President Gayoom, now opposition leader. He chose to lash out at the government as all being "[slaves of India](#)" (Sun MV, 19 March 2022). This statement highlights the situation many small countries in Asia face: They have to navigate their position between the Asian giants India and China. Under Gayoom's rule, the choice had been for China. That seems now to have changed. India and the Maldivian government proceeded with plans to open an [Indian consulate](#) in the southernmost atoll in Addu (The Interpreter, 29 March 2022). The government's decision to [ban](#) any "India Out" protests led to increased opposition, even within President Solih's own MDP (The Diplomat, 11 May 2022). Meanwhile, the government submitted a bill seeking to [criminalize the "India Out"](#) campaign as damaging the country's diplomatic interests, a move that has been decried by the opposition as being against freedom of expression (The Sun MV, 29 June 2022).

The [stabbing of three](#) foreign nationals in Malé in February 2020 (BBC News, 6 February 2020) and the [police raid on Maduvvari island](#) targeting a radical Islamic group in December 2019 (AP, 20 December 2019) show that the Maldives is not just trying to keep the country 100% Islamic, but is also struggling with violent militancy. Another stark reminder of this reality was the arrest of 14 members of a militant group allied with the Islamic State group (IS) for an alleged [bomb plot](#) they planned to carry out in the archipelago (Washington Post, 15 November 2022). This in turn shows that the Christian minority has to be very cautious and cannot dare to show in public its presence as a Christian community. Even though the new political leadership of the country shows less Dictatorial paranoia than the one before, there is little doubt it would jump into action should Christians be perceived as a threat or even a blemish to the nation.

### **Gender issues**

The legal framework of the Maldives remains restrictive towards women and girls, primarily due to the influence of Sharia law. Whilst it ratified the CEDAW convention in 1993, the Maldives maintained a [reservation to Article 16](#) which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage (UNHCR, 2019). Maldivian Muslim women [cannot marry](#) a man of a different religion, unlike Muslim men; this makes it harder for female converts to Christianity to marry a Christian as they are still considered Muslims under the law. Furthermore, pathways to divorce are less accessible for women, which restricts opportunities to escape abusive marriages ([OECD, 2019](#)). In a 2019 CEDAW periodic report, it was observed that the Maldives have developed legal frameworks to align with obligations under CEDAW, such as the Gender Equality Act (2016) and the Sexual Offences Act (2014). Critics have however

[criticized](#) the government for wanting to appeal to a women's rights narrative whilst doing little to effect actual change (DevEx, 6 April 2018). The Maldivian government in response has [launched](#) a new five-year Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) to ensure the effective enforcement of the law (UNDP, 23 March 2022).

## Religious landscape

The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians is "hundreds". The country is officially 100% Sunni Muslim and each Maldivian citizen wanting to turn away from Islam will lose his or her citizenship. Among the many expatriate workers, there are Christians (as well as Hindus), but if they dare to meet at all, they have to be very cautious and inconspicuous.

The language of the Maldives is Dhivehi: The complete Bible in this language is not yet available.

In the 12th century, Sunni Muslim traders brought Islam to the Maldives which had been a Buddhist country for centuries. The one-time strong Sufi tradition is declining as the influence of Saudi Wahhabism grows, despite a cooling of relations with Saudi Arabia in 2017 when the government announced a massive Saudi investment in the country prematurely, thus angering the Saudi king. The investment never came to pass, but influences from Wahhabism and also Salafism have poured into the Maldives nevertheless, not least through the Internet.

COVID-19 changed the religious landscape at least temporarily insofar as many Christians working in the hospitality sector lost their jobs and returned to their homes, predominantly in other South Asian countries. They are now in the process of returning, since the country has [opened up again for tourism](#) (Ministry of Tourism, 29 December 2022).

## Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 17,417. The most important economic sectors are tourism and agriculture (mainly fishing and coconuts), and also sand mining.
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 8.2% of the population live below the national poverty line, people in multidimensional poverty count for 0.8%, people vulnerable to it for 4.8%.
- **Remittances:** 0.07%.
- As around 80% of the country is one meter or less below sea level, the Maldives is concerned about the effects of global warming.

According to the World Bank country profile:

- Maldives is categorized as an upper-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 16,596 (compared with 200 USD in 1978).
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 31% (after -33.2% in 2020; 2019 saw a record arrival of tourists with 1.7 million, but tourism came to an effective halt with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The dependency on tourism can be seen in the fact that 73.1% of the workforce are employed in the services sector, responsible for 81% of the country's GDP).
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** 0.6% (2016).

The Maldives was hit very hard by the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic since the economy is mainly dependent on tourism and many expatriate workers are employed in this sector. Statistics are however, far from certain. Whereas the UN population estimate is 466,000, the CIA Factbook gives a far lower number (391,900 - most likely due to many expatriate workers leaving the country). The World Bank estimate is highest of all at 515,000. This uncertainty lives on in the highly political question: 'How many migrants are there working in the Maldives?' The Maldives Bureau of Statistics answered this in May 2021, stating that [more than 177,000 migrant workers](#) were employed in the Maldives as of end of March 2021. 63% come from Bangladesh, with India and Sri Lanka a distant second and third respectively (Avas, 2 May 2021).

The economic and social challenge of these numbers becomes clearer if held against the number of indigenous workers, which is estimated to be 181,000. The immigration office [announced](#) in January 2019 that there were approximately 63,000 illegal residents, most of them employed in the tourist sector (Maldives Independent, 17 January 2019), so this number also has to be added to the official number of migrant workers. Given such figures, it is not surprising that human trafficking [the illegal supply of migrant workers] is the second most lucrative economic sector after tourism, according to official government figures from 2011. Corruption poses another challenge for the economy. However, in Transparency International's CPI 2021 the Maldives is now ranked 85th out of 180 countries (with a score of 40/100 points), which continues the trend of a major improvement compared to recent years.

Quoting the World Bank's country overview, COVID-19 was a big challenge for the economy: "Tourism is the main driver of economic growth, fiscal revenues, and foreign exchange earnings in Maldives. After the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, Maldives closed its borders for three months, which severely hit the sector. Only 555,494 tourists visited in 2020, a third of the 2019 level. Following a nationwide vaccination campaign that commenced in February 2021, over two thirds of the population have now been fully vaccinated. This supported a stronger recovery in tourism in the second half of 2021, with total arrivals reaching 1.3 million by the end of the year. However, a high dependence on tourism and limited sectoral diversification remains a key structural challenge as the country is highly vulnerable to external and macroeconomic shocks. Disruptions stemming from the pandemic and shocks due to global conflict highlight the risks associated with reliance on a single economic sector."

The [return of Islamic militants](#) from abroad, especially from Syria, are often regarded as heroes in Maldivian society and may endanger the tourist business (Maldives Independent, 17 December 2019). In normal times, the news in February 2020 that a stabbing attack had wounded three foreign nationals and that in April 2020 the Islamic State group (IS) claimed its [first attack](#) on the Maldives by burning five government-owned boats would have been highly worrying for the country's economy (Long War Journal, 16 April 2020). However, with the COVID-19 crisis, times are far from normal. The complete tourist sector came to a halt and did not re-start until 15 July 2020, hitting the islands arguably harder than the attacks by militants (mentioned above) ever could have. According to CNN Travel (16 July 2020), tourism accounts altogether for [two thirds](#) of the Maldives' GDP. However, in 2021, the [number of tourists](#) slowly picked up speed and - as of July 2021 - was already exceeding previous forecasts (Raajje, 19 July 2021). To quote the World Bank overview once more: "A recovery in tourism has led to a strong

economic rebound since Q2 2021. Real GDP grew from a low base by over 70 percent (y-o-y) in Q2 and Q3 2021. Notably, Maldives received over 1.3 million tourists in 2021, which was about 80 percent of 2019 levels. Despite a new wave of COVID-19 infections, due to the Omicron variant, the growth momentum has continued into 2022. Tourist arrivals were 43 and 54 percent above 2021 levels in January and February 2022, respectively." Total tourist arrivals in 2022 reached almost [1.7 million](#) (Ministry of Tourism, 29 December 2022).

Christians (many of whom work in the hospitality sector) are also suffering from the economic blow caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recovery will take a long time with people facing a lot of insecurity and changes. Religious minorities (such as Christians) could easily be used as scapegoats for all kinds of woes, including unemployment. This means they need to be even more cautious than before COVID-19 struck.

### Gender issues

In general, women are the most economically vulnerable. The Maldives has fallen in rank on the UNDP's [Gender Inequality Index](#) over the past decade, dropping from 49th in 2014 to 82nd in 2020, which is mainly due to low female representation in Parliament and a low women's labor force participation rate due to gender bias (UNDP, 2020, p. 362). Furthermore, under Sharia rules of inheritance, which govern private estate inheritance in the Maldives, [daughters inherit half that of a son](#) (OECD, 2019). This is based on the premise that men bear the responsibility of financially supporting a household financially while women are not required to do so. In light of these economic vulnerabilities, women are often economically dependent on men.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the the CIA Factbook and UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The Maldives shows a mixture of Sinhalese, Dravidian, Arab, Australasian, and African descent, ethnicities play no major role in the country.
- **Main languages:** Dhivehi is the main language, a dialect related to Sinhala, but the script is derived from Arabic. Most government officials speak English as well.
- **Urbanization rate:** 41.5% with most of it concentrated in the capital Malé, which is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. More than 30% of the total population lives there.
- **Literacy rate:** 97.7% (age 15 and higher).
- **Mean years of schooling:** 7.0 Whilst boys and girls attend primary schools at an equal rate, more boys go on to attend secondary and tertiary education than girls, according to [Borgen Project](#), reporting on 28 June 2018.
- **Health and education indicators:** There are 45.6 physicians and 43 hospital beds available per 10,000 people. The student teacher ration in primary school is 10:1.

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Population/Age distribution:** 20% of the population are under 14, 3.7% are above 65.
- **Education:** The gross school enrolment rate for primary school is 98.0% (2019), the primary school completion rate is 91.7%.

- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 6.1%, the percentage of people in vulnerable employment is 18.9% (modeled ILO estimate).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** There is only a very small number of IDP/Refugees in the country, but the number of legal migrant workers is estimated at 1/3 of the whole population and 63,000 undocumented in an [IOM](#) country profile published in 2019

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.740, the Maldives rank 95th out of 189 countries.
- **Life expectancy:** 78.9 years.
- **Median age:** 29.9 years.
- **GINI coefficient:** 31.3.
- **Gender inequality:** In the Gender Inequality Index, the Maldives score 0.369 and rank 82.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 6.1% and 19.5% of the population are in vulnerable employment. The rate of unemployed youth is 16.8%, the rate of youth neither in school nor employment is 21.9% (between 15 and 24 years of age).

Maldivian society is Islamic and - according to UNDP figures - very young, with a median age of 29.9 years. The Maldives are facing serious social problems, such as drug addiction, cases of sexual abuse and high divorce rates without being able to find solutions. Reportedly, drug addiction is also a problem among some of the few Christians in the country.

An unpublished 2009 study on violence against children - possibly not published due to its grim findings – states that one in seven children of secondary school age in the country has been sexually abused at some time in their lives. It also discovered that the rate of sexual abuse for girls is almost twice as high (20%) compared to that of boys (11%). Girls are particularly at risk in the capital, Malé. The study also revealed that 47% of Maldivian children under the age of 18 have undergone physical or emotional punishment at home, school or in the community. It is also more common among students attending secondary school in the atolls, with one in four reporting they had been hit by adults or other children during the past year. The figure for Malé was 14%. More recent reports are not available but the problem is officially recognized. The Ministry for Family and Children, for instance, [reported](#) higher child abuse numbers in November 2017 and the mayor of the capital Malé decried the increasing crime in his city (Maldives Independent, 16 November 2017).

The Maldives has the highest divorce rate in the world, with a nine out of ten ratio – some Maldivians have allegedly “tied the knot” sixty times! Following Islamic custom, a husband can divorce his wife by simply saying “I divorce you!” three times. The high divorce rate is blamed on the nature of the husbands’ work in the shipping and tourism industries. They are required to be away from home for an extended period of time. This results in a lack of trust and in financial difficulty for many women. Given the small size of the country and with many islands basically being micro-societies in themselves, the number of youth out of school and employment is worryingly high. A good example for these microcosms has been the situation on [Maduvvari island](#), where a group of radical Muslims was able to deprive women and children of healthcare and conduct child marriages, going against national laws (Associated Press, 20 December 2019). Another example for the social problems is a continued high level of gang

violence, which regularly produces [victims](#) (The Edition Maldives, 9 February 2021).

The small number of Christians suffer from a lack of options for enjoying fellowship and worship together, which results in isolation, social problems and illnesses which they share with the majority of the population.

Under [patriarchal societal norms](#), women are expected to assume responsibility for household management, with men assuming the role of financial provider and decision maker (OECD, 2019). In a [2019 Periodic Report](#) submitted by the Maldives to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, it was observed that negative gender norms continue to harm both boys and girls (UN, 2019). As noted by the OECD, whilst women enjoy relative freedom in the public sphere through health and education, social conservatism remains the norm in the private sphere, where Sharia law is more likely to be adhered to (OECD, 2019). Gender-based violence is widely accepted within Maldivian culture and domestic violence – [considered a private matter](#) – is usually unreported by victims (Equality Now, 24 November 2021). Domestic violence levels are reported to have [increased](#) during the COVID-19 lockdown, with government support services unable to provide sufficient support to victims (OHCHR, March 2021, p.2; [World Bank](#) blog, 11 December 2020). Instances of rape and sexual harassment are relatively common in the Maldives. A [quarter of women](#) have reportedly experienced some form of violence in their lifetime (World Bank, 2020) and Human Rights Watch considered gender-based violence ‘endemic’ in the Maldives, worsened by rising Islamist extremism which has [increased harassment](#) both online and in the public sphere (HRW, 2021).

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 78.1% penetration rate - survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 78.1% of the population – survey date: January 2022

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 133 per 100 people

According to the Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022, in South Asia there is a gender gap in mobile phone ownership of [19%](#) (GSMA, 2022). This is significantly less in the Maldives, however, at just [1%](#) (BMJ, March 2020). This indicates that men and women have similar levels of access to technology.

The Maldives are challenged by their geographical situation, consisting of a high number of atolls spread over a wide area in the Indian Ocean. It should also be kept in mind that there is a wide gap between resort islands for tourists (with unhindered Internet access and all the technological niceties of global life) and residential islands where the indigenous population lives. Therefore, all such statistics should be viewed with caution.

In terms of press freedom, the Maldives jumped to 72nd in the World Press Freedom Index 2020, up from 120th three years before. While this was an encouraging sign, much remains to be done, especially in the protection of journalists and also in [holding responsible](#) perpetrators of intimi-



dation and (previously even murder) of journalists, referred to above in *Political and legal landscape* (Human Rights Watch, 21 April 2021). In the latest edition of the Press Freedom Index (2022), the country slipped back to rank 87 with an overall score of 59.55/100 points.

As the number of Internet users increases, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources. As long as government intervention remains low, this is likely to strengthen isolated members of the Christian community. However, [serious restrictions](#) came into force in November 2021. According to The Times of Addu (reporting on 30 November 2021):

- "The Criminal Court of Maldives on Tuesday [30 November 2021] gave 72 hours to the Maldives Police Service to shutdown all internet mediums used to promote religions other than Islamic in the national Dhivehi. The statement by Maldives Police service read that internet content promoting religions other than Islam to Maldivians including social media pages, YouTube channels and other applications have been ordered to be blocked in the Maldives by the Criminal Court. With this, the Maldives Police Service has sent notice to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block all such media within 72 hours and send confirmation to the police. The order was made under the Religious Unity Act (Act No. 6/94) which prohibits the practice by citizens of any religion other than Islam."

## Security situation

What was stated in the Full Country Dossier for WWL 2021, remains relevant: A country observer once referred to the Maldives as a "[Paradise lost to terrorism](#)" (Jamestown, 22 January 2016). This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives do have one of the highest per capita rates of Islamic militants fighting abroad, a Maldives Independent report from December 2019 speaks of [1400 militants](#) in action. The challenge is now how to re-integrate them on their return from fighting in Syria. Connected with this, [two additional challenges](#) arise (Jamestown, 25 March 2019): One is that it is completely unclear what to expect from widows and children of shahids (Islamic militants killed in Iraq and Syria) returning to the Maldives. The authorities do not know how to deal with them, although they are cracking down on violent militants. The other challenge is that Islamic militants who have returned have been acquitted in court due to lack of proof that they were actually involved in fighting after 2015, the time when a law penalizing fighting in a foreign war came into force. Those men are free and are regarded by many Maldivians as being true Islamic heroes.

In September 2019, the government placed [17 organizations](#) on a list under the Anti-Terrorism Act (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2 December 2019). While the attack against Parliament Speaker Mohamed Nasheed has to be mentioned here, it is not clear if it is related to extremist elements of the country's Islam, so while it is correct to speak of "an [ominous rise of intolerant Islam](#)" in the Maldives, it may be premature to connect it with this particular bomb attack (The Economist, 15 May 2021).

The threat of returning radicals has been clearly outlined in a report entitled "[Prison Radicalization in the Maldives](#)", which was joint-published by Transparency Maldives and the Ministry of Home Affairs in August 2022. Unlike his predecessors, President Ibrahim Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) no longer wishes to turn a blind eye to the [threat](#) of Islamic

extremists in his country (Lowy Institute, 7 October 2022). According to the report, there are around 50 surviving Maldivian women and children detained in camps in northeast Syria, which the president is seeking to repatriate. They are all that remain of the estimated 250 men and women (a significant number considering the population is little over 500,000), who were lured by hollow promises to fight for jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria.

So far, Christians have not been a particular target for radical Muslims, but this is more due to them keeping a low profile than for not being considered a target worthy of attack. Should Christians become more visible or should Maldivians be exposed or just accused of being Christian, this may quickly change.

## Trends analysis

### **1) The Maldives is coming more into the international spotlight, but has not changed its ideology**

With the intention of the USA to [open an embassy](#) in the Maldives in 2023, the country will come more into the international spotlight (Reuters, 18 September 2022). The protests against the country's growing ties with India have already been mentioned above. Another reason why the Maldives are receiving increased international attention is because several superyachts belonging to Russian billionaires are currently at [anchor](#) in Maldivian waters to avoid international sanctions (Channel News Asia, 7 April 2022). In another surprising case of international interest, ousted [Sri Lankan President](#) Gotabaya Rajapaksa temporarily fled to the Maldives on a military plane, after being blocked from travelling to Dubai (Channel News Asia, 13 July 2022). However, this increase in international interest does not mean that in terms of freedom of religion either legal or social circumstances in the Maldives will change. Neither expatriate nor the very few indigenous Christians can expect any relief in the short term. Nevertheless, new restrictions on hate-speech may give some protection for anyone regarded as being different or deviating from the norm (see below: Islamic oppression). As far as the "protection of Islam" is concerned, it is fair to say that the new government will play the same old tunes all over again. The fact that the Maldivian police announced that a November 2021 court ban on webpages with "[anti-Islamic content](#)" (read: promoting non-Islamic religions) was still to be implemented (Sun, 5 January 2022) shows how serious the protection of Islam is being taken. The Maldives will stay '100% Islamic' and this means that Christian activities will need to remain under the radar.

### **2) The attempt is being made to counter radical Islam in the midst of a dire economic situation**

As already stated above, the year 2020 saw two Islamist attacks in the Maldives. This would be worrying enough, especially given the number of veteran fighters pouring back into the Maldives. If the number of 1,400 militants referred to above (in: Security Situation) is correct, it may turn out to be too many for the country's authorities to handle on their own, given the nation's small size. Investigations into motives behind the attack against former President Nasheed have unearthed a wider network of Islamists and brought [more suspects](#) to light (SATP, 2 August 2021). The allegedly slow pace of investigations made him [break](#) with President Solih, although both hail from the same party and have been friends since youth (Edition MV, 12 July 2021). Although Maldivian politics is notorious for its volatility, the breaking of political ties

comes at a critical time.

The COVID-19 crisis struck another harsh blow to society, especially in its economic aspects. Instead of welcoming an expected two million visitors in 2020, the Maldives had to cope with a decline in numbers of around 70%-75%. Consequently, the Maldives have looked for international help; support has become something of a competition between India and China. The fact that Islamic radicals [disrupted](#) an event celebrating International Yoga day (AP News, 21 June 2022) shows that radicals are adept at using not only religious but also political divisions in the country; yoga is seen as a spiritual discipline rooted in Hindu philosophy and the event was sponsored by the Indian embassy. This sort of attack acts as a warning for all religious minorities.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: Mohamed Nasheed - [http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/mohamed-nasheed-talks-about-the-island-president-keeping-fragile-democracy-afloat/2012/04/12/gIQUUzvCFT\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/mohamed-nasheed-talks-about-the-island-president-keeping-fragile-democracy-afloat/2012/04/12/gIQUUzvCFT_story.html)
- Recent history: bomb attack - <https://apnews.com/article/maldives-democracy-e3b3dc9f6b2b9bff01ee4e5659b6eb34>
- Recent history: protection of "religion unity" - <https://english.sun.mv/63934>
- Recent history: stop the mockery of religion - <https://en.sun.mv/68673>
- Recent history: block webpages - <https://timesofaddu.com/2021/11/30/isps-ordered-to-shutdown-content-promoting-religions-other-than-islam-within-72hrs/>
- Political and legal landscape: killing - [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?ref=todayspaper&utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=52f02e25af-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_04\\_24&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-52f02e25af-399904105&r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?ref=todayspaper&utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=52f02e25af-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_04_24&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-52f02e25af-399904105&r=0)
- Political and legal landscape: two-thirds majority in parliament - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/elections-commission-set-to-announce-results-144781>
- Political and legal landscape: corruption scandal - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/8/who-tried-to-kill-mohamed-nasheed>
- Political and legal landscape: Islamist groups - <https://apnews.com/article/government-and-politics-religion-islamic-state-group-maldives-0b491f40f6a5a72ad31b82b193af0322>
- Political and legal landscape: slaves of India - <https://en.sun.mv/73519>
- Political and legal landscape: Indian consulate - <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-consolidates-its-role-southern-maldives>
- Political and legal landscape: ban - <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/decreed-banning-india-out-campaign-in-maldives-fuels-protests/>
- Political and legal landscape: criminalize the "India Out" - <https://en.sun.mv/75861>
- Political and legal landscape: stabbing of three - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51399357>
- Political and legal landscape: police raid on Maduvvari island - <https://apnews.com/article/29ee51514b40dac943baf8265282d55d>
- Political and legal landscape: bomb plot - [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/maldives-arrests-14-for-alleged-islamic-state-tied-bomb-plot/2022/11/15/d419d336-64b4-11ed-b08c-3ce222607059\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/maldives-arrests-14-for-alleged-islamic-state-tied-bomb-plot/2022/11/15/d419d336-64b4-11ed-b08c-3ce222607059_story.html)
- Political and legal landscape: reservation to Article 16 - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fMDV%2f6&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fMDV%2f6&Lang=en)
- Political and legal landscape: cannot marry - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/MV.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: OECD, 2019 - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/MV.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: criticized - <https://www.devex.com/news/in-the-maldives-total-regression-of-women-s-rights-environmental-protection-activists-say-92479>

- Political and legal landscape: launched - <https://www.undp.org/maldives/press-releases/ministry-gender-family-and-social-services-launches-gender-equality-action-plan>
- Religious landscape description: opened up again for tourism - <https://www.tourism.gov.mv/en/downloads/status-update>
- Economic landscape: more than 177,000 migrant workers - <https://avas.mv/en/99451>
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## WWL 2023: Church information / Maldives

### Christian origins

This is officially a 100% Sunni Muslim country. In the interest of security no information about the Christian presence can be published in this section.

### Church spectrum today

Due to security issues, no WCD breakdown can be published.

### Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Persecution takes place outside of those islands reserved for international tourists.

### Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians often come from India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. These communities are monitored closely, but most of them have the freedom to meet (e.g. in embassies) provided they meet quietly and stay strictly amongst themselves. Expatriate Christians do not have any contact with indigenous converts from Islam.

**Historical Christian communities:** There are no historical churches in the Maldives.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christians with a Muslim background face by far the highest persecution as - officially - they do not exist in the country. It is understood that every Maldivian must be Muslim and anyone leaving Islam will lose his or her citizenship.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** These do not exist in the Maldives.

## WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Maldives

### Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

### Position on the World Watch List

Maldives: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	77	15
WWL 2022	77	16
WWL 2021	77	15
WWL 2020	78	14
WWL 2019	78	14

*Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods*

In WWL 2023, the level of pressure on Christians remained very high, resulting in a basically unchanged total score. The very low violence score remained at the same level as in previous years. Converts have literally no space at all to live out their Christian faith and expatriate Christians (often migrant workers) lack possibilities for worshipping together without fearing arrest and deportation. Consequently, the Maldives is one of the few countries where the score for pressure in the *Church sphere* continues to reach almost maximum points. The new government, which took over in mid-November 2018, has made no tangible improvements as regards freedom of religion and is more focused on internal political struggles.

### Persecution engines

Maldives: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
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)**

The Islamic government still sees itself as the protector of Islam and watches over a set of laws that prohibits a Maldivian from leaving Islam and converting to another religion. To be Maldivian is equated to being Muslim, leaving no room for any deviation, and a convert to another religion will face harsh consequences including losing citizenship. Officially there are no Maldivian Christians, only expatriate Christians. Under the old government, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs had published a policy paper in April 2018 dealing (among other topics) with the question of [apostates](#) (Maldives Independent, 11 April 2018), stating that apostasy can never be tolerated. Around the same time, the Minister of Defense stated in all due clarity that he will [never allow freedom of religion](#) in the Maldives since it is a "country with moderate Islamic values" (Maldives Independent, 15 April 2018). In November 2021, the government ratified the [5th amendment](#) to the criminal code which "will criminalize accusing or portraying a person as anti-Islamic based on the behavior or an opinion expressed by the person that does not contradict with the opinions of scholars of Ahl al-Sunnah Wal Jamaah. Accusing or portraying a Muslim as an apostate or a non-Muslim in public, unless the person has explicitly declared an expression amounting to *kufr* or has publicly proclaimed to be an apostate is also an offence" (Government of the Maldives, 28 November 2021). This shows the government's determination to protect Islam and highlights at the same time the political use of categorizing a person's behavior as 'unislamic'.

### **Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)**

While campaigning for re-election in 2018, then-President Yameen claimed that international pressure and opposition forces were attempting to make the Maldives less than [100% Islamic](#) (Maldives Independent, 3 July 2018). His defeat and arrest on corruption charges makes his political comeback unlikely. While it seems that President Solih has a different approach and may even have a genuine wish to implement more democracy and freedoms - thus indicating that Dictatorial paranoia is on the decline - this is not true for all freedoms. Freedom of religion continues to be restricted since "protection of religion" is purely understood to mean the protection of Islam. The law for protecting "religion unity" (sic!) is also worrying, as the wording indicates that the authorities will oppose any perceived deviation from their understanding of Islam. A Human Rights Watch report commented: "The government has often [relented to pressure](#) from powerful politicians and religious groups instead of upholding freedom of speech and association. When clerics and social media activists label their critics as *laadheenee* and threaten violence, the government has repeatedly failed to protect rights or prosecute those who carry out attacks" (Human Rights Watch, 24 April 2022). A country expert summed it up with a note of humor: "Perhaps nasty political partisanship is not the same as *Dictatorial paranoia*, but sometimes it smells similar."

### **Organized corruption and crime (Medium)**

Corruption is rampant from the highest levels of government on down. Almost anything can be accomplished through sufficient bribes, favors and/or threats. Contracts and other agreements can be broken at whim and government officials are known to hire street-gang youth to do dirty work for them (e.g. roughing people up, committing property crimes against designated targets, selling contraband to raise cash). Many street gangs have been steered by government leaders

(at all levels), and especially target anyone who speaks out against the government or against strict Islam. It is common knowledge that certain gangs are in alliance with politicians, parties and security forces and are used for the violent intimidation of dissidents. One country expert quoted a police report: "In May 2022, Maldives Police Service reported 44 gangs active across the capital, of which nine 'are believed to be extremely dangerous'. The report said about 2,800 individuals across the country, including 60 children, have been identified as being involved in gangs." Radical Islamic groups that want to ferret out Christians and atheists also have connections and influence with gangs and corrupt police networks.

## Drivers of persecution

Maldives: Drivers of Persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG							MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Government officials	Very strong							Very strong	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong							Strong	
Violent religious groups	Weak								
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong								
One's own (extended) family	Very strong								
Political parties	Strong							Strong	Medium
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium							Medium	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. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Drivers of Islamic oppression

- Government officials (Very strong):** The government of the Maldives insists that the country has to be run according to conservative Islamic tenets and that all citizens have to be Muslim ("100% Islam"). This is a fundamental issue which the new government is not going to try to change. There have even been calls to remove "secularists" from the government. Labeling someone as an "unbeliever" or as "irreligious" is a safe way of dealing with political opponents or inconvenient groups like journalists. Religious freedom does not exist, except in a very limited way for expatriate Christians who are so strictly monitored and intimidated that they hardly dare to meet even behind closed doors. But all Christians know the rules and stay within the narrow framework set by the law.



- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Radical Islamic preachers and clerics, whether homegrown or coming from the Middle East, exert strong socio-religious control over their followers and are also influencing others with their radical views of Islam, making it impossible for Christians - especially converts - to show their faith due to the fear of monitoring and of being handed over to the authorities. They have been instrumental in calling for the [shutdown](#) of the NGO Maldivian Democracy Network (Amnesty International, 5 November 2019). They also exert influence over the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. When a bill was proposed that would criminalize public accusations that an individual had violated or insulted Islam, and public allegations that a Muslim was a non-Muslim, 101 religious scholars, 106 religiously affiliated NGOs, and 123 island councils signed petitions, issued statements, held online discussions, or organized peaceful protests as part of a campaign they termed “Ban Secular Bill” (US State Department, IRFR 2021, p. 9).
- **Extended family and normal citizens (Very strong):** Family and local communities are drivers of persecution for converts as well, if the latter are discovered. Even the mere interest in Christianity leads to social ostracism and pressure from family, friends and neighbors. Society is closely-knit and Malé is a city with the one of the highest population densities in the world. Such factors serve to make these drivers strongly felt, as is the fact that less populated atolls are not easy to leave, which results in high social control as well. A relatively recent tool for extending the pressure (on Christians and others) has been found in social media. This is increasingly being used by family members and citizens against deviating thoughts and opinions.
- **Political parties (Strong):** A recent example were the Adhaalath Party and the Jumhooree Party, which opposed the introduction of a bill to criminalize the labelling of persons as non-Muslims or *kafirs*, the so called 'hate crime bill'. This party claimed that the proposed amendments would not benefit Islamic society and that the consequences might be irreparable. The law was introduced in December 2021.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** It is not clear whether jihadists returning from fighting with the Islamic State group affiliates abroad have already become organized and formed groups, but their presence is a growing threat, reflected in the attacks in the WWL 2021 reporting period and the bomb attack against former President Nasheed (although not targeted against Christians) in the WWL 2022 reporting period.
- **Organized crime cartels (Medium):** Whereas most gangs are not particularly interested in religious questions and are far more focused on making money and being able to exert power through brute force, some are motivated by religion, too.

#### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Politics in the Maldives has a history of being dominated by strongmen, who have clung to power by all means. The president did not break with this tradition. Civil servants and authorities stick to what they know and the opposition (even though seriously weakened) uses every opportunity to call the new government "un-Islamic" and a threat to the very identity of the country. Therefore, all the ingredients for more *Dictatorial paranoia* are in place - at the expense of minorities and anyone seen as deviating from the norm.

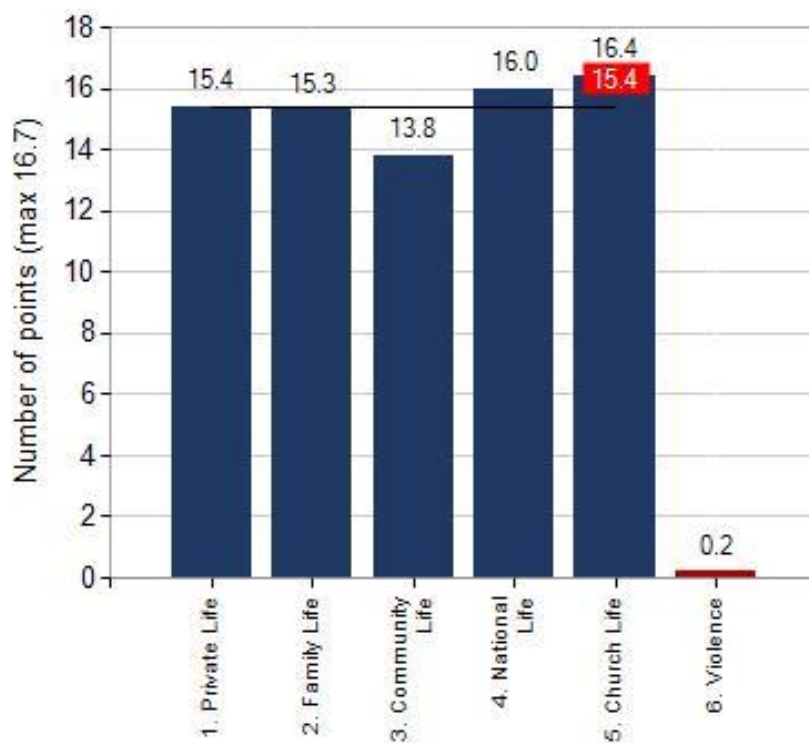
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Islamic leaders may not necessarily be interested in one political party or in one particular politician staying in power, but they are definitely interested in preserving the status quo. If this means supporting the authoritarian measures of a leader or party, they will do it.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Leaders of political parties in the Maldives have a long history of clinging desperately to power. It remains to be seen if President Solih and the MDP follows in this tradition. The fall-out with former President Nasheed in the WWL 2022 reporting period may not be a good sign in this respect.
- **Organized crime cartels (Medium):** As already stated above, in order to protect their illicit activities, gangs will support the power-brokers they need. The Maldives has a long history of ties between gangs, politics and religion.

#### Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- **Government officials and political parties (Medium):** Officials from the old government (i.e. pre-November 2018) and various political parties allegedly made use of gangs as they saw the need for it and such connections were of mutual benefit.
- **Organized crime cartels (Medium):** Radical Muslims have been known to link up with gangs and use them to ferret out Christians and atheists or anyone suspected of non-Muslim activity. Gangs can skillfully adapt their operations and seem to be beginning to show their power again.

### The Persecution pattern

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Maldives



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for the Maldives shows:

- Pressure on Christians in the Maldives is extremely high in nearly all spheres of life, causing the average pressure to be at an extreme level. It increased by 0.1 point compared to WWL 2022 to a score of 15.4, where it has been in WWL 2021 already.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church sphere*, where it almost reached the maximum score, reflecting that in practice no Christian meetings are possible. Most expatriate Christians also prefer not to organize meetings out of fear of repercussions. Scores in the *National, Family and Private spheres* are also at an extreme level. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Family spheres*. All politicians relentlessly claim that they are keeping the Maldives 100% Muslim, leaving effectively no space for any deviation.
- The score for violence against Christians went down to the very low level of 0.2 points, again confirming that persecution has never been violent in the Maldives, but also reflecting that it is difficult to obtain verified reports of incidents.

## 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 2023 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 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points)**

Any Maldivian displaying a lifestyle different from what the government considers Islamic will be punished. Converts to Christianity always have to exercise the utmost care to hide their faith as much as possible. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution as their families will never accept their conversion and the possession of such literature could result in imprisonment, even if it is on electronic devices. Even for migrant Christians, it is dangerous to have Christian materials in their possession (especially if these are in the native Dhivehi language or in large quantities) as the authorities may suspect they are being used to evangelize the local population. In fact, when entering the country, all travelers are required to declare any non-Muslim religious materials they are bringing in with them. In general, they are allowed to bring their personal Bible into the country.

### **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.). (4.00 points)**

Given that all Maldivians are expected to be Muslims and given the ease with which bloggers and other social media users have been accused of being "apostates", it is highly risky for converts to reveal their faith in any form. And even the Christians among the migrant workers cannot reveal, let alone share, their faith safely in any way. Sharing their faith to an indigenous Maldivian would be highly risky, even if done in the migrant's own language. Even if such talking about Christian faith could happen in a guaranteed anonymous way, most Christians would not dare to do so. The court order to [block online media](#) from being used to propagate other reli-

gions illustrates the risk individual Christians are facing (Sun MV, 30 November 2021). This was also shown when the Jesus Film appeared on Facebook in November 2021 and became the topic of much discussion in the Maldives.

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

The authorities and local community are constantly looking out for images and symbols perceived as being anti-Islamic. According to US State Department (IRFR 2021, p.11): "Customs officials reported two cases involving the import of non-Islamic religious idols and religious banners during the year. Authorities confiscated the items in one case and were continuing to investigate the other case as of year's end.". Occasionally, even randomly cross-shaped object like branches of a tree or the axis of a compass rose can be frowned upon. Any converts or Christians in general showing anti-Islamic symbols will quickly find themselves in trouble.

**Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (4.00 points)**

Christianity is outlawed, so no Christian will risk speaking about their faith with another Maldivian. For expatriate Christians, their job contracts even stipulate this condition. As quoted by US State Department (IRFR 2021, p.5):

- "The law states, 'Non-Muslims living in or visiting the country are prohibited from openly expressing their religious beliefs, holding public congregations to conduct religious activities, or involving Maldivians in such activities.' By law, those expressing religious beliefs other than Islam face imprisonment of up to five years or house arrest, fines ranging from 5,000 to 20,000 rufiyaa (\$320 to \$1,300), and deportation."
- "Propagation of any religion other than Islam is a criminal offense, punishable by two to five years in prison or house arrest."

**Block 1 - Additional information**

*Meeting with other Christians is a major challenge since on the one the hand it is dangerous for the individual, and on the other hand it may disclose the whereabouts of and endanger a Christian meeting. Additionally, there is a lot of distrust and fear between Christian believers. There have been cases where even spouses only discovered after years that both of them were active Christians, as they had hidden their faith from one another out of fear. Private meetings are theoretically allowed for expatriates, but participants need to be very careful not to raise suspicion. As intimidation has increased, most Christians decide not to meet at all.*

*"In September [2021], the parliament secretariat announced an investigation into statements made by Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party MP Abdulla Jabir, who, during a session of parliament, called for greater freedom of religion in the country. Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Zahir and President of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs Mohamed Rasheed Ibrahim told media that Jabir's statements violated Islamic tenets. A day later Jabir recanted his statement and apologized" (US State Department, IRFR 2021 p.8).*

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (4.00 points)**

Practicing any religion other than Islam in public is prohibited both for Maldivians and expatriates. Since Christianity is forbidden in the country, baptisms (being the most visible sign of belonging to Christ) cannot take place and would have to be done outside of the Maldives - and even then in secret, so that the conversion is not made known.

### **Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (4.00 points)**

Expatriate Christians would usually be buried in their country of origin. But if they choose to be buried in the Maldives, it cannot be done according to Christian rites. For converts, a Christian burial is out of question; they will be buried with Muslim rites.

### **Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (4.00 points)**

In the very report that finally led to its ban, the Maldivian Democracy Network stated in 2015 that Islamic textbooks used in schools cultivate anti-semitism and xenophobia, and glorify jihad or war against those who allegedly "obstruct" Islam. An illustration of the prevailing climate in society occurred in January 2018, when parents raised their concerns about "blasphemous" content in secondary school textbooks. Screenshots of grade eight textbooks featuring explanations about Roman gods when explaining the names of the planets began circulating on social media and led to a prompt reaction by the government. Both examples show how much pressure children of Christians face every day - even more so children of converts. Nothing has changed since then.

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

The Constitution states in Article 36 (c): "Education shall strive to inculcate obedience to Islam, love for Islam...". Children of converts are forced to study Islamic teachings. Although children of expatriate Christians are exempt from attending Islamic classes, Islam permeates school-life and lessons, so that expatriate Christians prefer to send their children to international schools or even abroad, if they can afford it.

### **Block 2 - Additional information**

*Article 9 (d) of the Constitution states that a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives. Accordingly, if Maldivians are found to have converted to Christianity, they could be stripped of their citizenship as well as punished under the laws of Sharia. As every Maldivian is automatically understood to be a Muslim, it is out of the question for converts to get their registered religion changed. Similarly, expatriate Christians are not allowed to hold any religious activities in public (including Christian weddings). Converts often decide not to share their new-won faith with their children out of fear that these may inadvertently tell others. Once converts are discovered, they can be put under pressure to divorce (if married) and lose both custody of*

*their children and inheritance rights, and are likely to be isolated from their families. Under such circumstances, it is hard to imagine how any Christian family life can take place for converts.*

## 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.). (4.00 points)**

Social control in the Maldives is extremely strong as the population density is one of the highest in the world, especially in the capital Malé. Maldivian society has become more strictly Islamic over the years. There has been a change in how Maldivian women dress: In earlier years, it was uncommon to see women wearing a black burka, but now (through Arab influence) wearing the burka has become quite common and the pressure to wear at least a hijab is considerable. This affects Christians as well. US State Department IRFR 2021 (p.2) states: "NGOs continued to report that persistent online and in-person threats against individuals perceived to be insufficiently Muslim". During Ramadan, even migrant workers are not allowed to eat or drink during daytime and the newspapers publish how many people are taken into custody or fined during Ramadan for violations.

**Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)**

As stated above, social control in the Maldives is extremely strong. One country expert reported: "There is little or no privacy for either nationals or expatriates, either in the outer island villages (where everyone knows everyone else's business) or in the crowded capital (where CCTV is ubiquitous and population density means people live almost on top of one another)." Maldivians suspected of being Christian have been reported to the police. Expatriate Christians are not permitted to openly practice their faith and neither expatriate Christians nor Christians with a Muslim background have any real privacy.

As reported by US State Department IRFR 2021 (p.2): "In August [2021], the NGO Maldives Journalists Association published a threat perception survey of journalists in which 37 percent of the 70 local journalists who participated reported 'being labelled irreligious and threatened by radicalized or violent extremist individuals or groups online'. Respondents to the survey also reported an increase in anonymous social media accounts believed to be linked to government officials or groups characterized as religiously extremist that harassed journalists. NGO reported the government continued to fail to take action against online death threats and attacks against those perceived to be critical of Islam."

**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). (4.00 points)**

If a convert owns a business and his Christian faith becomes known, it will be shut and he will face the consequences. But even expatriate Christians are often suspected of using their business for other purposes and thus, even the task of opening a business can be an uphill battle.

As one country expert explained: "Contracts can be pulled with no notice or rational explanation."

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

All nationals are considered Muslims and are expected to take part in Islamic rituals and community events. This includes attendance at the local mosque as well. If a convert (tries to) skip attendance, this will raise suspicion and lead to questioning. Expatriate Christians enjoy more freedom, but there are times when they too are required to blend in, for example during Ramadan, by not eating and drinking in public during the day.

**Block 3 - Additional information**

*Children of known converts are shunned and harassed at school. They may also be forced to leave the school and may have no other option but to attend a school abroad, if they want to continue their studies (and their parents can afford it). Colleagues at work apply constant pressure on expatriate Christians to make them convert to Islam. They try to prove to migrant workers that Jesus is not the Savior and even use money or promises of promotion at times. Converts try to blend in with the majority of people around them in their efforts to hide their faith.*

## 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)**

The Constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The Constitution designates Sunni Islam as the official state religion, referring to the country as "100% Muslim", and government regulations are based on Islamic law. The Maldives take no little pride in this. Among other regulations, one states: "It is illegal to propagate any other religion than Islam." Penalties for violating this regulation range from house-arrest to imprisonment of up to five years, depending on the gravity of the offense. If the offenders are foreigners, they will usually be deported. As quoted by US State Department IRFR 2021 (p.7): "The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), with a reservation stating the government's application of the principles set out in ICCPR Article 18, which relates to religious freedom, shall be "without prejudice to the Constitution of the Republic."

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)**

Any opinions that seem contrary to Islam (even voices of Islamic moderation) are subject to harsh criticism and even violence. Especially with the "Defamation Law" and the Religious Unity Law in place, which include clauses against anti-Islamic comments, Christians' freedom of speech is restricted even more than before.

The US State Department IRFR 2021 (p.4) states: "Laws criminalize speech breaking Islamic tenets, breaching social norms, or threatening national security. The penal code criminalizes 'criticism of Islam'. According to the law, a person commits the offense of 'criticizing Islam' by

'engaging in religious oration or criticism of Islam in public or in a public medium with the intent to cause disregard for Islam; producing, selling, or distributing material criticizing Islam; producing, selling, distributing, importing, disseminating, or possessing idols of worship; and/or attempting to disrupt the religious unity of the citizenry and conversing and acting in a manner likely to cause religious segregation'. Individuals convicted of these offenses are subject to imprisonment for up to one year."

**Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)**

There are no Christian civil society organizations allowed in the country, let alone political parties. Expatriates are not allowed to be active in politics and cannot run Christian NGOs. As stated under 3.2, NGOs report that they have experienced threats and cyber-bullying even if they were merely suspected of being critical of Islam.

**Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (4.00 points)**

Anything conveyed about Christians will almost always be negative and critical. But the negative descriptions are generally aimed in a corporate way at Christian outsiders, not directed at individuals within Maldivian society, because all nationals are assumed to be Muslim. Expatriate Christians become targets of smear campaigns or hate-speech if they are perceived to be spreading their faith. Slandering someone as a suspected or known Christian, or damaging their home or business (for example), not only elicits no punishment but is seen as a patriotic duty. An example of how the media portray the Christian threat can be seen in the reaction to the Jesus Film in November 2021. Media depicted Christian mission as a concerted public danger with a lot of money behind it, targeting little children in particular. Articles in many newspapers, published over several days, put pressure on the police to stop this sort of Christian activity and to find out who was responsible for airing the Jesus Film.

**Block 4 - Additional information**

*It goes without saying that it is not possible to display Christian symbols at churches or meeting places since there are no churches in the Maldives in the first place. If a convert has to stand trial - a rare occasion - he or she cannot expect any fairness at all, and not just because the Maldivian legal system is notoriously corrupt and inefficient.*

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)**

There was a fully functioning Christian church in the Maldives in the period 1950s -1976 which catered mainly for British military personnel and others. Today, the law prohibits the establishment of places of worship for non-Islamic religious groups. The law states "non-Muslims living in or visiting the country are prohibited from openly expressing their religious beliefs, holding public congregations to conduct religious activities or involving Maldivians in such activities." The law further states that those expressing religious beliefs other than Islam face imprisonment of up to five years or house arrest, fines ranging of up to \$1,300 and depor-



tation. For converts, it is even more out of the question to have an official gathering place for Christian activities.

**Block 5.6: Work among youth in particular has been restricted. (4.00 points)**

No Christian work among youth is allowed at all. Expatriate Christians strictly limit themselves to educating their own children within their homes in matters of Christian faith.

**Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)**

Expatriate Christians are monitored and so are their meetings, preaching and teaching. Especially in the capital city, Malé, there are CCTV cameras everywhere - including where Christians are known to gather. Maldives consists of small atolls, so everything is known and monitored.

**Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (4.00 points)**

Selling or distributing Bibles within the Maldives is impossible and a criminal offence. In July 2021, [the Maldives Custom Service](#) stated that there was an attempt to spread Christianity in Dhivehi, the Maldivian native language, "by envelopes with sealed information from all over the world. Customs found that they had received post from different places with information about Christianity translated into Dhivehi. The information is sealed in an envelope, addressed to various government bodies, businesses and to homes of citizens. According to investigations made by customs, the receiving end has no idea what these envelopes are in relation to. Under the law that protects Islam (94/6), clause number 4, Article 7, bringing in books about other religions into the Maldives, advertising those books, exposing the Maldivian society to it, conducting exhibitions in regards to it, selling and distributing the books is prohibited in the Maldives." (Rajje MV, 7 July 2021).

According to US State Department IRFR 2021, p.11: "In a July 6 statement, the Maldives Customs Service announced it was launching a joint investigation with MPS into Christian literature, published in the local Dhivehi language, being mailed to institutions, companies, and individuals based in the country. In December, customs reported it was unable to verify the origin of these items, and police reported the investigation closed. Customs officials reported two cases involving the import of non-Islamic religious idols and religious banners during the year. Authorities confiscated the items in one case and were continuing to investigate the other case as of year's end." In December 2021, customs officials reported they were unable to verify the origin of these items, and police reported the investigation closed.

**Block 5 - Additional information**

*The Maldives scores almost maximum points in the Church sphere. It is illegal for Maldivians to become Christians, let alone to gather as a church. There have been incidents where public gatherings of expatriate Christians were raided, although not in the last years. The government [banned Christmas celebrations](#) in guesthouses on inhabited islands in December 2015, claiming that the practice is contrary to Islam and Maldivian culture (Maldives Indepen-*

dent, 24 December 2015). The Local Government Authority (LGA) – back then chaired by Home Minister Umar Naseer – sent a letter to the presidents of island and atoll councils (as well as to the mayors of Malé and Addu cities) asking them to inform guesthouse owners not to conduct any celebratory activities for tourists at Christmas. The letter noted that the current period is the peak season for the tourist industry and that it had come to the LGA's attention that "tourists are carrying out activities to celebrate Christmas in the Maldives". The new government did not change this approach. Training Christian leaders is out of the question and Christian communities are not allowed to receive foreign Christian workers for ministry work. According to Post-COVID regulations, international visitors are only allowed on resort islands and they need to book their entire stay in one registered establishment.

## 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 5 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. For further discussion** (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

**4. 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 WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

**5. The symbol “x” in the table:** This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Maldives: Violence Block question		WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (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?	x	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?	0	0
6.8	How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	0	0
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?	0	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?	x	x
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?	0	0

For security reasons, no details about violent incidents involving Christians can be published.

## 5 Year trends

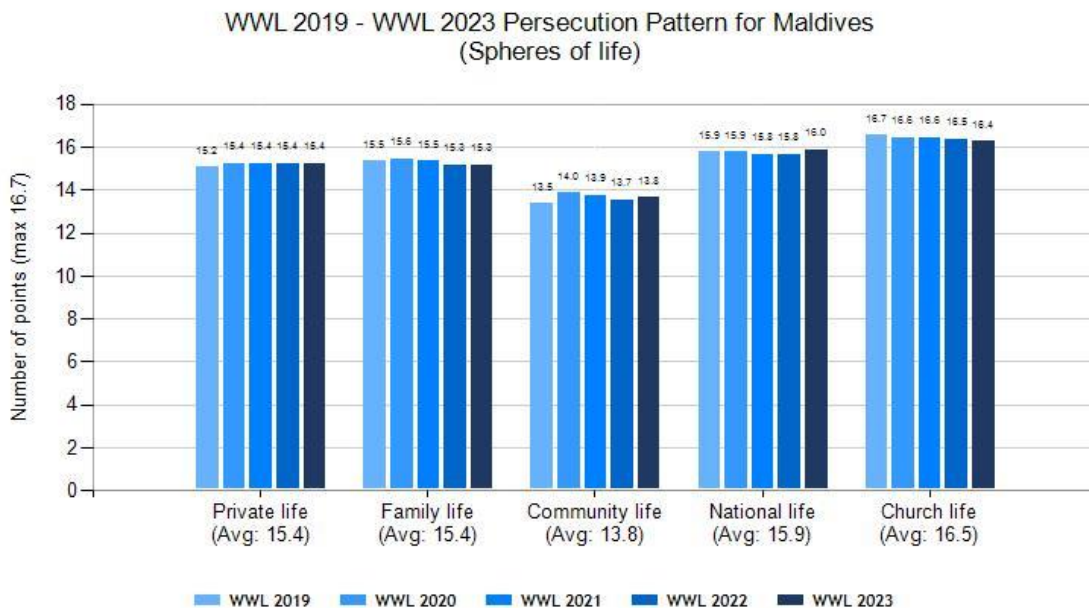
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

## 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Maldives: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	15.4
2022	15.3
2021	15.4
2020	15.5
2019	15.4

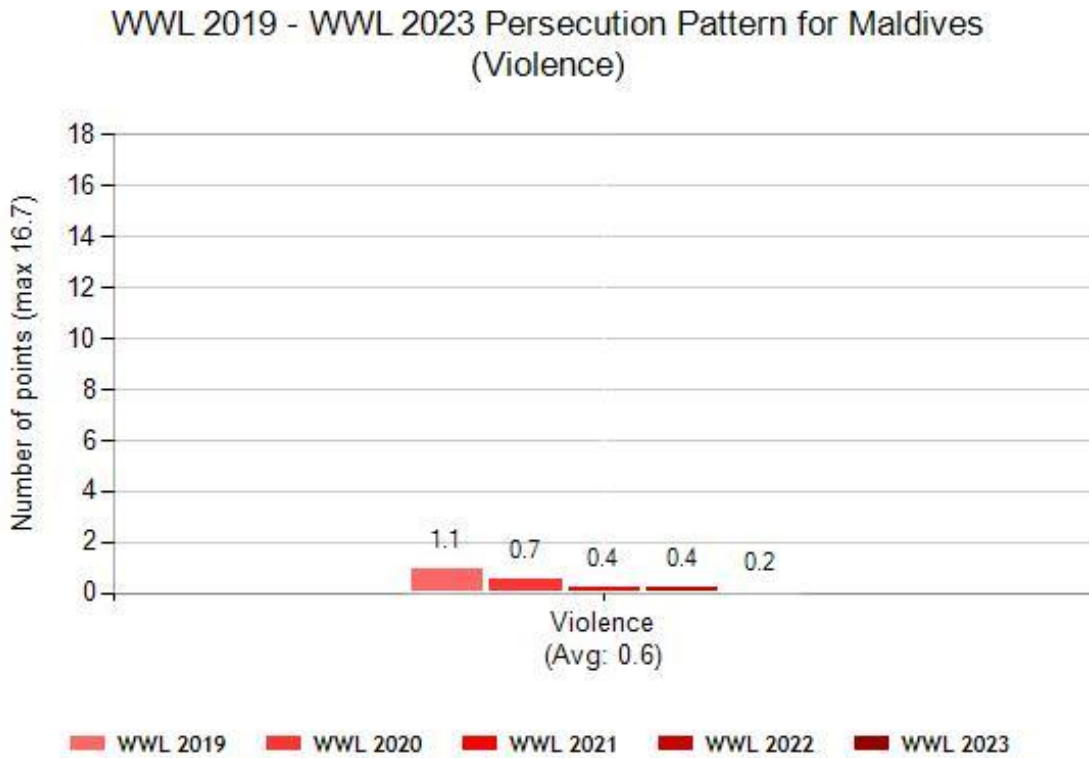
The table shows that the average score for pressure on Christians has been stable at the extreme level of 15.3 - 15.5 points.

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



The chart above shows the levels of pressure on Christians in individual *spheres of life* over the last five WWL reporting periods. The scores have not altered much over the years and have remained at very high and extreme levels. In *National Life*, the scores reflect the strong *Dictatorial paranoia*, whereas the other spheres reflect more the *Islamic oppression*, although the motives are difficult to separate in practice. The maximum and almost maximum scores in *Church sphere* stand out, reflecting the fact that church life has become almost impossible.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As can be seen in the chart above, persecution has never been very violent in the Maldives. The violence score fell to the lowest level for all 5 reporting periods.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Given the extremely strict interpretation of Islam in the Maldives, non-expatriate Christian men and women must be secret believers to avoid severe persecution. If a Christian woman or girl is discovered to be a Christian, she risks being pressured into marriage and exposed to domestic violence in an attempt to force her to reject her new-found faith. NGOs have reported ongoing community pressure on women to wear Islamic clothing and harassment of women who choose not to do so (US Department of State IRFR 2021, p.12). A country expert explained: “Maldivians

are expected to wear hijab when they reach a certain period of their lives (e.g marriage, having children). Thus, once they're 'expected' to do so but do not conform, then they get pressured and harassed.”

Despite the closely-knit social control on the islands, abuse, rape and sexual harassment are surprisingly common in a culture that generally excuses gender-based violence within the home. According to a country expert, “sexual abuse and child abuse is rising as well as domestic violence”. This observation is supported by reports which further note that the COVID-19 lockdown has been a contributing factor to a spike in violence (HRW 2022 country chapter). The threat of sexual and physical abuse can be used as a tool for religious persecution against Christian women.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Being a non-expatriate Christian in the Maldives is so dangerous for both men and women that husbands, wives and children may not even know of each other's faith. The inability to meet as a community creates instability in the family and lack of access to Christian support, mentoring and training. If a Maldivian is found to be a secret Christian believer, he is likely to face bodily harm, harassment, threats and possibly government imprisonment (although there have been no such cases in recent years). In light of this pressure, many have chosen to leave the country and live abroad, when possible financially. If imprisoned, the wider family will suffer financially and emotionally, and children are likely to be bullied at school.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

There are no recognized religious minorities of any kind in the Maldives. All nationals are required to be Muslim by law. Anyone giving evidence of support for any religion or philosophy besides Islam (e.g. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, [atheism](#)) will be persecuted in the same way as Christians and most of them prefer to go into exile rather than face imprisonment or even death (Humanists International, 8 October 2020).

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Islamic oppression

The government is emphasizing its defense of being 100% Muslim. Protecting and defending Islam will remain the government's top priority, as could be seen in the quick banning of the NGO Maldivian Democracy Network (see above). Although the country relies heavily on international tourism, attempts to promote the unique attractiveness of the tourist resorts increasingly clashes with the country's staunch emphasis on a strict interpretation of Islam. It does not look as if the government will change this approach, despite the COVID-19 crisis seriously harming the economy and damaging tourism. In such an atmosphere, expatriate Christians need to continue to be very cautious and Maldivian Christians will have to keep hiding their faith carefully.

### Dictatorial paranoia

As already indicated above, the high levels of paranoia under the previous government are gone. However, the country has a long track-record of dictatorship and of politicians clinging to power, so religious minorities and atheists, among others, cannot expect any improvement in the freedom of religion in the near future. The level of *Dictatorial paranoia* in the Maldives has decreased, but it is not gone and the [road to democracy](#) will be long, winding and bumpy (The Diplomat, 1 November 2020). This is even truer with a possibly [developing split](#) within the ruling MDP (Frontline, 8 September 2022).

### Organized corruption and crime

The island's younger generation continues to feel increasingly "disenfranchised and excluded" and "disconnected from the fabric of society", as indicated by a [World Bank report](#) released in October 2014. Rising globalization, Internet use and economic expansion have "exposed young women and men to the outside world and new ideas and values, making them acutely aware of what they can aspire to", reads the report. "Yet, both female and male youth face the shackles of the limited island economy, lack empowerment and community engagement, and contend with rigid norms of behavior and increasingly conservative values, as well as an inadequate education and training system that ill prepares them for the labor market." The report argues that young Maldivians are being "denied passage into adulthood". These social issues translate into a growing radicalization, which fuels *Islamic oppression*. Others join the country's gangs, which are well connected with Maldivian power-brokers and politicians and are used as thugs against perceived enemies and dangers. As long as the younger generation lacks future perspectives, nothing will change in this respect.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: apostates - <http://maldivesindependent.com/society/apostates-jihadists-and-extremists-face-tough-new-punishments-137396>
- Persecution engines description: never allow freedom of religion - <http://maldivesindependent.com/society/will-not-allow-religious-freedom-in-maldives-says-defence-minister-137455>

- Persecution engines description: 5th amendment - <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/25879>
- Persecution engines description: 100% Islamic - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/islam-infrastructure-and-foreign-pressure-maldives-president-on-campaign-trail-139123>
- Persecution engines description: related to pressure - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/04/14/i-could-have-been-next/stymied-reforms-maldives>
- Drivers of persecution description: shutdown - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/maldives-ngo-closure-shows-repression-hasnt-gone-away/>
- 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.). (4.00 points): block online media - <https://en.sun.mv/70743>
- Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (4.00 points): the Maldives Custom Service - <https://raajje.mv/102886>
- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: banned Christmas celebrations - <http://maldivesindependent.com/business/maldives-bans-christmas-celebrations-at-guesthouses-120958>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: atheism - <https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-southern-asia/maldives/>
- Future outlook: road to democracy - <https://thediomat.com/2020/10/jj-robinson-on-the-maldives-return-to-democracy/>
- Future outlook: developing split - <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/ruling-party-feud-in-the-maldives-casts-shadow-over-its-election-prospects/article65835271.ece>
- Future outlook: World Bank report - <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/460551468263693729/pdf/939490WPOP15300th0Report0with0cover.pdf>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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