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Mauritania: Country Dossier

December 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

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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).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- 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).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Mauritania

Brief country details

Mauritania: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
4,784,000	10,800	0.2

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Mauritania: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	71	20
WWL 2020	68	24
WWL 2019	67	25
WWL 2018	57	47
WWL 2017	55	47

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Mauritania: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Violent religious groups
Ethno-religious hostility	Ethnic group leaders, Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Violent religious groups
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

Organized corruption and crime	Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials, Violent religious groups
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Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Collective acts of worship are particularly difficult due to the restrictive environment which makes it impossible for Christians (especially for converts from Islam) to openly meet and conduct services. Any expression of faith by non-Mauritanian Christians (e.g. migrants from sub-Saharan Africa or aid-workers) also carries the risk of being understood as attempted proselytization of Muslims and can lead to prosecution.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

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

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

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

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

Several incidents took place affecting both indigenous and foreign Christians in the country. However, no details can be provided due to security concerns.

- Baptisms can only be carried out in secret and many converts from Islam are reluctant to be baptized fearing discovery and charges of apostasy being brought against them.
- Converts that are discovered by their families often feel pressured into leaving the country.
- The Roman Catholic Church (being the dominant Christian denomination) is allowed to renovate the interior of churches. However, the renovation of the exterior of Catholic churches and the construction of churches belonging to other denominations is prohibited.

- All churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, have to operate carefully in order to avoid accusations of proselytism.

Specific examples of positive developments

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

External Links - Short country profile

- 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 2021: Keys to understanding / Mauritania

Link for general background information

- [Mauritania country profile - BBC News](#)

Recent history

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

Most Christians in the country are foreigners, mainly from neighboring sub-Saharan African countries. They enjoy limited religious freedom and can attend worship only in designated compounds. Any outreach to Mauritians, who are all supposed to be Muslim, is strictly forbidden. The number of Mauritanian converts from Islam to Christianity remains low. They experience high levels of family, societal and governmental pressure.

Political and legal landscape

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

Both president and former president belong to the 'Union for the Republic' political party, which was formed by Abdel Aziz himself. This party has the majority of seats in Parliament, with the Islamist 'Tawassoul' party having the next largest number. The 'Tawassoul' party is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and its presence is a clear reminder of the Islamist influence in the country. However, despite its democratic appearance, Mauritania remains a country run by an elite class of high-ranking military officials and businessmen, in which tribal and ethnic ties play a major role.

Other sources report:

- [Middle East Concern](#) (MEC) writes: "Mauritania's constitution establishes Islam as the State religion and as the religion of Mauritanian citizens. Apostasy and blasphemy are prohibited by the Penal Code, which states that any Muslim found guilty of apostasy, by word or deed, will be condemned to death. Any activity construed as non-Islamic proselytism is strictly prohibited. The Press Act proscribes the printing, distribution and importation of non-Islamic religious materials, though private ownership is not illegal. ... While churches are not formally registered, non-Islamic worship is permitted within a small number of designated sites, which are exclusively for non-Mauritanians" (MEC, accessed 14 September 2020).
- According to the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU): Mauritania is classified as an 'authoritarian' regime (EIU, Democracy Index 2019).
- Humanists International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) ranks Mauritania as having grave violations: "The law and legal procedures of Mauritania are based on Sharia. Sharia crimes such as heresy, apostasy, atheism, refusal to pray, adultery and alcoholism are all contained in Mauritania's Penal Code. The Code includes punishments of lapidation, amputation and lashings. Sharia norms are also reflected in Mauritania's 2001 Personal Status Code (a legal code which regulates all matters related to marriage, divorce, family and inheritance issues). Its Article 311 states that for difficulties of interpretation as well as in cases where the Code is silent, reference should be made to Sharia" (Humanists International, 24 October 2019).

- The [Fragile State Index's](#) (FSI) political indicators show improvement over the previous years, but scores remain high, thus indicating that political freedom remains restricted (FSI, accessed 14 September 2020).

Religious landscape

Mauritania: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	10,800	0.2
Muslim	4,749,000	99.3
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	19,000	0.4
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	450	0.0
Atheist	400	0.0
Agnostic	4,500	0.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

According to WCD 2020 estimates, 99.3% of Mauritians are Muslim (the majority being Sunni) and this reality is reinforced by the official designation of the country as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Christians constitute only a very small fraction of the population (0.2%). Although Islam in Mauritania has traditionally been heavily influenced by Sufism, over the past few decades the influence of radical Islamic groups has become very prominent and increasingly visible. The activity of Arab countries from the Gulf region (including the provision of development aid) has been significant in this process. The Muslim Brotherhood is also believed to have been very prominent in Mauritania until recently. Christianity is viewed as a condemnable Western influence and government hostility towards Christians is high (particularly towards converts from Islam to Christianity).

[Middle East Concern](#) reports: "Christians face severe restrictions in practice. While expatriate Christians are permitted to worship, Christian activities are restricted to designated compounds. Christians and Christian NGOs must ensure that they avoid any interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytist. Mauritanian nationals who choose to leave Islam would in principle face the death sentence under the apostasy provisions of the Penal Code, although there are no known examples of a judicial death sentence being applied for apostasy in recent years. However, those who leave Islam are likely to face violent responses from family or community members" (MEC, accessed 14 September 2020).

Economic landscape

Mauritania is one of the world's poorest countries despite being rich in various mineral resources, including oil and iron ore. Only 4% of the land is arable, and there is little internal food security. Many Mauritanian children are malnourished, and when there is enough food, it is often too expensive for the poor to afford. While the government's adherence to World Bank's strictures of economic liberalization has brought financial growth, it has also plunged many of the working poor into even greater poverty.

According to the [World Factbook](#) (accessed 14 September 2020) and [World Bank data](#) (June 2020):

- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$4,500 (2017 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 9.5%, with youth unemployment being slightly higher at 14.7%
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 31.0% (2014 est.)

According to [World Bank's July 2020 update](#):

- "Economic growth increased from 2.1% in 2018 to 5.9% in 2019, driven by a rebound in the extractive sector due to increased mining production, particularly of gold and iron. In parallel, non-extractive growth remained robust (at 5% in 2019) thanks to strong growth in the energy and telecommunications sectors, which compensated for the deceleration in the agricultural and fishing sectors."
- However, "while macroeconomic stability has improved in recent years, it will be greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The outbreak will mainly affect the economy due to the global economic slowdown and the contraction of domestic consumption, which will be impacted by the social distancing measures put in place by the authorities to reduce the spread of the virus. As a result, GDP growth could plummet from 5.9% in 2019 to between -2% and -6.8 % in 2020."

Other sources report:

- The [World Bank's](#) "World by Income" report puts the Mauritanian economy in the lower middle income category (World Bank, accessed 16 September 2020).
- The [Fragile State Index](#) (FSI) shows that there are small but steady improvements in the economic indicators (FSI, accessed 9 September 2020). However, it is likely that this will be negatively effected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- According to [BTI Mauritania 2020](#) (p. 25): "Officially, unemployment is 10%, but a May 2018 World Bank study noted that the real number could be closer to 30%, with higher rates for 18- to 34-year-olds."

Most Christians in Mauritania come from neighboring sub-Saharan countries. They face discrimination in employment, but this is mostly in the form of racial discrimination, which is faced by all dark-skinned people in Mauritania. In addition, they face economic difficulties due to the government's Arabization policy which leaves less room for foreign workers, especially Christian foreign workers. Mauritians depend very much on their families and tribal relationships for economic security. Converts from Islam to Christianity have to face being expelled by their families and hence lose their livelihood.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [Word Factbook](#) (accessed 16 September 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Mauritanian population (40%) are Haratines (black Moors). 30% of the population consists of Beydanes (white Moors), while another 30% is from Sub-Saharan descent.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with French being understood by the higher classes as well. Other national languages are Pular, Soninke and Wolof.
- **Urban population:** In 2020, 55.3% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 4.28%
- **Literacy rate:** 53.5% of the population can read and write; with a significant difference between men (63.7%) and women (43.4%) (2017).
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 57% of the population, making it another African country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities
- **IDPs/Refugees:** In 2020, Mauritania hosted 60.000 refugees from Mali. In addition, there are 26,000 Sahrawis living in Mauritania, who originally come from Western Sahara.
- **Life expectancy:** 64.5 years on average; women (67.0 years), men (62.1 years).
- **Education:** Mauritians enjoy 8 years of schooling on average (2017).

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Mauritania ranks #161 out of 189 countries. The assessment of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a low score of 0.527, making Mauritania one of the lower scoring countries worldwide and indicating the challenges to improve living conditions for its citizens.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.853, women are clearly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

According to [World Bank's July 2020 update](#), educational development remains at very low levels. The report lists several deficiencies:

- Extremely low levels of teacher competence and a shortage of qualified teachers
- Poor management of the sector and high levels of teacher absenteeism

- Poor condition of school facilities and inadequate learning materials
- Lack of continuity in the education cycle

Other sources report:

- **Culture:** [Britannica](#) states: "Mauritania forms a geographic and cultural bridge between the North African Maghrib (a region that also includes Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) and the westernmost portion of sub-Saharan Africa. Culturally it forms a transitional zone between the Arab-Amazigh (Berber) populations of North Africa and the African peoples in the region to the south" (Britannica, accessed 16 September 2020).
- **Slavery:** Mauritanian culture is traditional and tribal at core. Mauritians blend various tribal and pre-Islamic cultural threads into modern day Mauritanian culture. The continued existence of the practice of slavery is one of the major problems in the country that causes social division and acrimony ([Minority Rights Group](#), accessed 16 September 2020) The issue of slavery is also a cause for division along ethnic lines among Mauritians: while white Moors and Berbers are of Arab descent; the descendants of the former slaves (of the white Moors) - who are also called Haratines or black Moors.- are of ethnic African descent. In addition, another significant group are the Mauritians of sub-Saharan descent, who mostly live in the border region with Senegal. While the Haratines (black Moors) and the Beydanes (white Moors) speak Arabic, the sub-Saharan Mauritians speak mostly other languages.
- **Marginalization of society:** Almost all political and economical power is in hands of the white Moors, which means that the majority of society (70%) remains significantly marginalized. This is also indicated by the [Fragile State Index's](#) cohesion indicators which show that factionalized elites are a major factor of social instability and its potential to disrupt social life remains high (FSI, accessed 16 September 2020). The low literacy and life expectancy rate, combined with only 8 years of schooling on average are other indicators of this marginalization.
- **COVID-19:** Although the official number of COVID-19 cases has been low (with around 7000 infections and 158 deaths as of August 2020), it is very likely that marginalized groups are heavily affected as there also low levels of awareness ([UNICEF Mauritania COVID-19 Situation Report](#)).

Mauritania remains staunchly Islamic with a significant presence of Islamist groups, including those related to the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, Mauritanian converts from Islam to Christianity are at high risk of societal discrimination and even physical violence.

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed June 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 20.9% penetration - survey date: December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 17.1% penetration – survey date: December 2019

According to [World Bank's country profile](#) (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 103.7 per 100 people

Mauritania is not included in Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2019](#).

North Africa is developing quickly in regard to Internet access, although Mauritania remains an underdeveloped country. The government probably lacks the resources to actively monitor the Internet, but public disagreement with the government or any content insulting Islam is punishable. The case of the [blogger](#), Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'khaitir, which has dragged on since 2014, is a prominent example (BBC News, 30 July 2019). In addition, the government closed down the Internet for two weeks in June 2019 to quell protests after the election of President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani.

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

Security situation

Violent Islamic militants, like those belonging to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), are particularly active in the eastern border regions of the country. Kidnapping by those or other criminal groups is a risk throughout the country, especially for foreigners.

AQIM has been a challenge to the Mauritanian government since 2005 but the army has had some success in its fight against this militant group. The USA has repeatedly expressed its concern over the steady spread of al-Qaeda's North African branch to the south of the continent in recent years. There is a very real fear that Mauritania might slide towards a more radical Islamic direction, since there is significant support for radical Islam among the population.

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

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

Trends analysis

1) The influence of radical Islam is increasing in the country

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

2) Political instability and poverty continue to be major issues

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

3) The number of Christians remains small

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

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Mauritania country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985>
- Political and legal landscape: World Politics Review, 10 January 2020 - <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28460/in-mauritania-president-ould-ghazouani-consolidates-power-irking-his-predecessor>
- Political and legal landscape: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/mauritania/>
- Political and legal landscape: Economist Intelligence Unit - <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-western-africa/mauritania/>
- Political and legal landscape: Fragile State Index's - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Religious landscape description: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/mauritania/>
- Economic landscape: World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>
- Economic landscape: World Bank data - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/mauritania>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's July 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mauritania/publication/improving-education-to-foster-social-cohesion>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's - <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>
- Economic landscape: Fragile State Index - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Economic landscape: BTI Mauritania 2020 - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-MRT-2020.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MRT>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank's July 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mauritania/publication/improving-education-to-foster-social-cohesion>
- Social and cultural landscape: Britannica - <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>
- Social and cultural landscape: Minority Rights Group - <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/haratin/>
- Social and cultural landscape: Fragile State Index's - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>

- Social and cultural landscape: UNICEF Mauritania COVID-19 Situation Report - <https://reliefweb.int/report/mauritania/unicef-mauritania-covid-19-situation-report-no-10-23-july-19-august-2020>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#mr>
- Technological landscape: World Bank's country profile - https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=MRT
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2019 - https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf
- Technological landscape: blogger - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-49165640>
- Security situation: BTI Mauritania 2020 - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-MRT-2020.html>

WWL 2021: Church information / Mauritania

Christian origins

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

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

Mauritania became part of French West Africa in 1904. French colonial interests and control remained mostly limited to the coast and the Saharan trade routes. The European presence in Mauritania was more focused on business than on presenting the Christian faith.

The Christian presence in Mauritania during the time of the French colonial rule was limited to resident Roman Catholic expatriates. Following independence from France in 1960, life for the few Christians in the country became very difficult, but the Roman Catholic Church founded a diocese in Nouakchott in 1965.

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

Church spectrum today

Mauritania: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	5,300	49.1
Protestant	2,300	21.3
Independent	2,600	24.1
Unaffiliated	680	6.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	10,880	100.7
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,300	12.0
Renewalist movement	2,700	25.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

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

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

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

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Mauritania

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Mauritania: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	71	20
WWL 2020	68	24
WWL 2019	67	25
WWL 2018	57	47
WWL 2017	55	47

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Mauritania's score increased by three points in WWL 2021 which was mainly caused by an increase in reported violence following a number of incidents, which also affected the pressure felt in some *spheres of life*.

Persecution engines

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

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

Islamic oppression (Very strong)

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

Clan oppression / Ethno-religious hostility (Strong)

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

Organized corruption and crime (Medium)

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

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)

The current government is quite paranoid about its hold on power, and this can lead to extra persecution if any "Christianizing" influence seems to either threaten or shame the government powers. In addition, it tries to shore up its legitimacy among Islamic groups by suppressing Christianity, which especially has become visible and still continues since the 2019 presidential elections. Christianity is often equated with Westernization and is as such seen as a (foreign) threat by the government.

Drivers of persecution

Mauritania:									
Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	STRONG	STRONG	-	-	-	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Government officials	Very strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	Medium	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	Medium
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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 authorities at all levels are a principal driver since the state embraces Islam as its basic ideology.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Radical imams and Islamic teachers fuel prejudice and hatred towards Christians.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Strong):** Tribalism is still strong in Mauritania and tribal leaders will not allow any converts among their groups.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** Islamic militants such as AQIM are particularly active in the eastern part of the country and form a threat to all Christians.

- **Family (Strong):** The strong tribalism and family ties among Mauritians do not leave much space for differing views and attitudes. Converts are very likely to face severe pressure.
- **Ordinary citizens (Medium):** Influenced by the teaching of conservative imams, Mauritanian society does not allow fellow citizens to convert from Islam to Christianity.

Drivers of Clan oppression / Ethno-religious hostility

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

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

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

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

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

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Tribal and family ties are especially strict in the rural part of the country, but even in the capital and largest city, Nouakchott, the pressure on Christians can be high. Violent radical Islamic groups, like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), are particularly active in the eastern border regions of the country.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Roman Catholic expatriates from sub-Saharan Africa make up the largest group, followed by Protestants and Evangelicals also from countries to the south of Mauritania. There is also a small Western Christian presence, but they are a very small percentage of the Christian population in the country. Ethnic African migrant Christians lead a precarious existence in the country due to the prevalence of ethnic prejudices and also the pressure that is related with the increasing Islamism in the country.

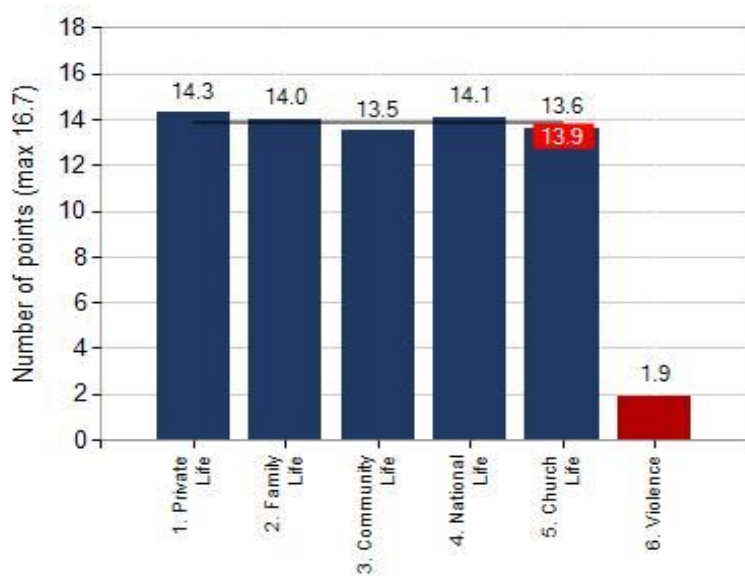
Historical Christian communities: This category of Christians does not exist in Mauritania.

Converts to Christianity: Christian converts from a Muslim background are most exposed to targeted pressure and violence. They face great pressure from their immediate and extended family. In this nomadic society where communal interdependence and the extended family are necessary for one’s survival, converts face a huge challenge to keep their Christian faith hidden from view. The hatred and false stereotypes that are propagated against Christians by Islamic groups affect most converts; they lose not only their status in their community but also their citizenship if their conversion becomes public knowledge.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category of Christians does not exist in Mauritania.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Mauritania



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Mauritania shows:

- The average pressure on Christians was at an extremely high level (13.9 points), rising from 13.6 in WWL 2020. The reason for this increase was the overall rise in pressure in all *spheres of life* through the effects of several incidents that happened during WWL 2021.
- Although all *spheres of life* show very high or extreme levels of pressure, pressure is highest in *Private, Family and National life*. This reflects the great pressure converts have to deal with. In Mauritania's tribal culture, leaving Islam is not only religious betrayal, but also betrayal of the tribe and family. Understandably, in such a culture there is no room for celebrating baptisms, Christian marriages or funerals. There is also no room to publicly speak about Christianity, nor is their official recognition of converts from Islam to Christianity.
- The score for violence went up from 0.2 points in WWL 2020 to 1.9 in WWL 2021. The violence score increased due to a number of incidents involving both expatriate and Mauritanian Christians. Nonetheless, the score remains low, which may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 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: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

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

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

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

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

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

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

remains a significant threat to Christians from a Muslim background.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.50 points)

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

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)

All Mauritians are considered to be Muslim.

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

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

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

Children of Christian parents are likely to face discrimination and harassment from their peers. These harassments also have a racial and ethnic side to them.

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

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

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

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

This happens to both converts as well as expatriate Christians. There is a high level of social hostility towards Christians.

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

Converts from Islam to Christianity often have to live their faith in secrecy and are hence obliged

to take part in Islamic or local religious practices (e.g. Ramadan).

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

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

Block 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (3.25 points)

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

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

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

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

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

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (3.75 points)

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

Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.50 points)

The state does not recognize (and hardly tolerates) converts who dare to make their conversion public.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (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 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.

Mauritania: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
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?	4	0
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?	3	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)?	10	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?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	3	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	1

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

Several incidents took place during the WWL 2021 reporting period: There were expatriate Christians who were expelled from the country and Mauritanian Christians who received sentences in court because of their faith. Following mob violence after their trial, the latter had to flee the country. Reportedly, tens of both expatriate and Mauritanian Christians seek refuge in neighboring countries each year.

5 Year trends

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

5 Year trends: Average pressure

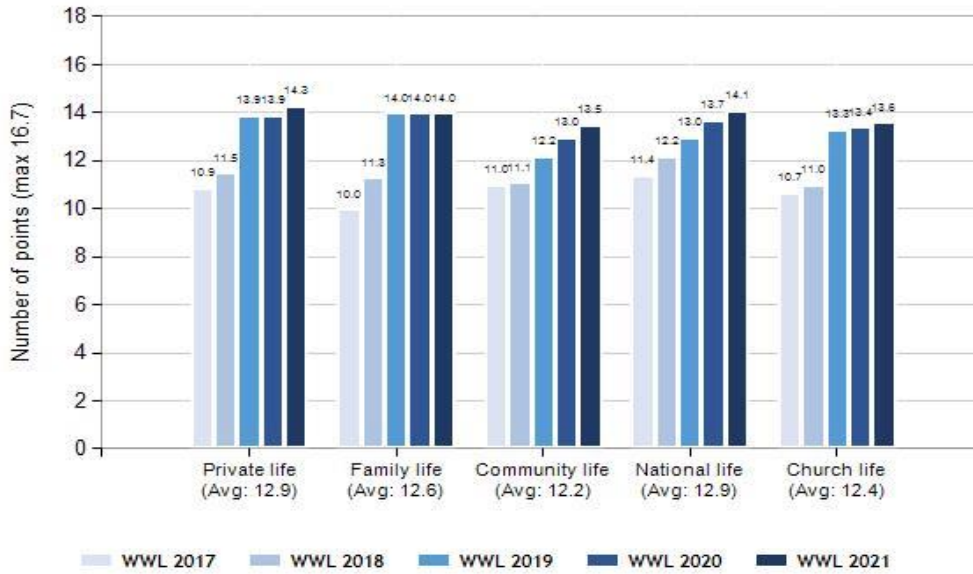
Mauritania: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	13.9
2020	13.6
2019	13.3
2018	11.4
2017	10.8

The table above shows a steady increase in average pressure, with the level rising from 10.8 points in WWL 2017 to the extreme level of 13.9 points in WWL 2021.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

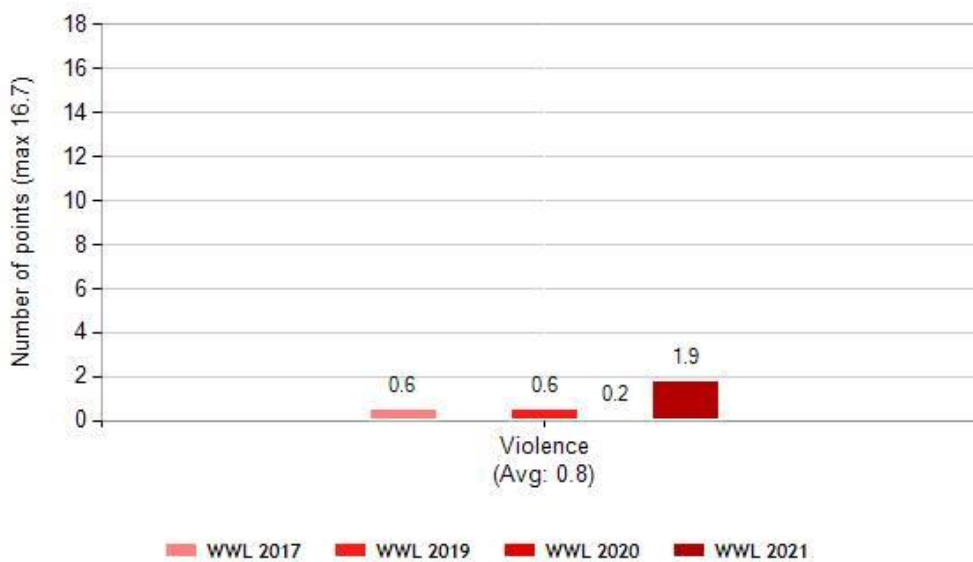
The levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* have seen increases in the period WWL 2017-WWL 2019 – see chart below. However, particularly in the *Private, Family* and *Church spheres of life* the pressure in WWL 2021 shows evidence of levelling off. The levelling off is at an extreme level in the *Private* and *Family* spheres. Pressure has also reached an extreme level in *National life* after continually increasing in each WWL reporting period.

WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Mauritania (Spheres of life)



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Mauritania (Violence)



The scores for violence remained more or less stable at a very low level in the first four WWL reporting periods, increasing to a low level in WWL 2021. However, the low scoring may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

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

Within Mauritania's tribal society, women are subject to the authority of their fathers and husbands. As such, the most vulnerable Christian females are those who have converted from Islam, the majority religion. Leaving Islam means disregarding father or husband and bringing shame upon the family. This will have severe consequences, especially since most women and girls are (financially) totally dependent on their families.

Traditional marriage practices place converts in a particularly vulnerable position. In Mauritania, one's first spouse is generally chosen by the parents, and this selection often happens before a girl comes of age. As such, unmarried female converts might find themselves forced into a marriage with a Muslim man to keep them under the influence of Islamic family life. In general, most women do not have a choice in marriage. When it is discovered that a woman or girl is Christian, she may be deprived of food, bullied, and put under house arrest in order to keep her isolated. Additionally, she may be subject to caning and excruciating servitude; the presence of modern-day slavery (despite laws against it) and [the lack of protective legislation](#) makes ruthless detention and exploitation of female converts more likely - and very hidden (OECD, "Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019, Mauritania").

In this culture, a girl always stays in the family home and does not leave her family until she is married; otherwise, she will be labelled a prostitute. Married female converts can easily be divorced and end up with no means to survive. In general, women can be easily divorced, and polygamy is still practiced.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points

Denied access to social community/networks

Economic harassment via business/job/work access

Forced out of home – expulsion

Forced to flee town/country

Imprisonment by government

Violence – physical

Violence – psychological

Christian men in Mauritania who convert to Christianity bring shame upon their (extended) family. As a result, they are most likely to be ostracized, thus losing respect and status in society and among their friends. Many Christian men are expelled from their homes, or physically abused. Sometimes, converts feel forced to flee their town or country to avoid being forced to perform Muslim rites; if it is confirmed that they have converted, charges of apostasy can be brought in a religious court.

Christian men have also been imprisoned for anti-terrorism and cybercrime offences, charged for “undermining national security by insulting Islam and threatening Mauritania’s sacred principles”, as a country expert explains. Guilty verdicts can result in long prison sentences and high fines.

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

Persecution of other religious minorities

Apart from the Christian minority, there is also a very small but growing Shia Muslim minority in Mauritania. While the government has good ties with Iran and did not target this community in the past, a Shia religious center was closed in 2018. Sunni religious leaders denounce this minority group and call for restrictive measures to be taken against the Shia Muslims. According to the US State Department's [2019 International Religious Freedom Country report](#) (p. 5): "During the annual Eid al-Adha observance, Imam Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, the imam of the Grand Mosque of Nouakchott, renewed his warnings about the growing influence of Shia Islam in the country. Rahman stated for a fourth successive year that government authorities should sever ties with Iran in order to stop the spread of Iranian-backed Shia Islam."

There is no place in Mauritanian society for other religious groups or atheists, as the case of Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'khaitir has shown (see Technological landscape above). As reported in the Freedom of Thought report: "In February 2020, 14 human rights defenders were arbitrarily detained after hosting an 'unauthorized meeting' in a guesthouse. 10 activists were subsequently accused of 'belonging to a group that promotes secularism' and three of the activists were charged with 'blasphemy' under article 306 the Penal Code and remain in detention" ([Humanists International, 25 September 2020](#)).

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression

Islamic oppression is likely to continue as a major persecution engine in Mauritania. There are no signs that this will improve in the near future. The tightening of the blasphemy law in 2018 indicates a deteriorating situation and several incidents involving Christians took place during 2020. The influence of radical Islamic groups is growing and this could seriously worsen the situation in the long term.

Clan oppression / Ethno-religious hostility

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

Organized corruption and crime

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

Dictatorial paranoia

The current government is determined to hold on to power and tries to shore up its legitimacy

among Islamic groups by suppressing Christians and Christian/Western influence. Christianity is seen as a possible threat to the power of the ruling social class and this attitude is not likely to change.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: BTI Mauritania 2020 - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-MRT-2020.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: the lack of protective legislation - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/MR.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: 2019 International Religious Freedom Country report - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mauritania/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Humanists International, 25 September 2020 - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-western-africa/mauritania/>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Mauritania>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Mauritania>