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## Mauritania: Country Dossier

December 2019



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55
36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55

37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

## Copyright notice

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## Brief note on 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 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

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 2020: Persecution summary / Mauritania

## Introduction

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Mauritania		
4,661,000	10,000	0.2

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Mauritania	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	68	24
WWL 2019	67	25
WWL 2018	57	47
WWL 2017	55	47
WWL 2016	50	0

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

## Brief description of 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.

## Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- 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 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 Catholic Church, have to operate carefully in order to avoid accusations of proselytism.



# WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Mauritania

## Introduction

### Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985>.

## 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 El-Ghazouani, was elected in June 2019. He was the candidate for the ruling Islamist 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. The country is formally a multi-party democracy, but its parliament is completely dominated by the ruling Islamist party.

## Political and legal landscape

The [EIU](#) classifies the government of Mauritania as authoritarian: "The Mauritanian government has struggled to maintain a presence throughout the country and enforce rule of law. Public administration is weak and vulnerable to corruption. Informal institutions such as family, tribal or personal connections are dominant. Various Islamist groups seek to benefit from the popular disapproval of the corrupt political elite and from the resentment over the regime's abandonment of democratization."

The [Freedom of Thought Report](#) ranks Mauritania as having grave violations: "The law and legal procedures of Mauritania are based on Sharia. Sharia crimes such as heresy, apostasy, atheism, refusal to pray, adultery and alcoholism are all contained in Mauritania's Penal Code. The Code includes punishments of lapidation, amputation and lashings. Sharia norms are also reflected in Mauritania's 2001 Personal Status Code (a legal code which regulates all matters related to marriage, divorce, family and inheritance issues). Its Article 311 states that for difficulties of interpretation as well as in cases where the Code is silent, reference should be made to Sharia."

The [FSI](#) political indicators show that state legitimacy continues to worsen.

## Religious landscape

According to WCD 2019 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 traditionally Islam in Mauritania has been heavily influenced by Sufism, the influence of radical Islamic groups has become very prominent over the past few decades

[MEC 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."

The influence and prominence of more austere and intolerant versions of Islam has become increasingly visible. The activity and aid of Arab countries from the Gulf region 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 (and in particular converts from Islam to Christianity) is high.

Religious Context: Mauritania	Numbers	%
Christians	10,000	0.2
Muslim	4,627,000	99.3
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	19,100	0.4
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	440	0.0
Atheist	390	0.0

Agnostic	4,500	0.1
Other	0	0.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

## Economic landscape

The [World Bank](#) classifies Mauritania as a lower middle income economy. It 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. Reportedly, one third of 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 also plunged many of the working poor into even greater poverty. According to [BTI Mauritania 2018](#) (p. 25): "Unemployment is high, at 31% ... Youth unemployment remains critical: Unemployment affects more young people: as two out of three unemployed are less than 35 years old. ... The World Bank said in 2013 that the government must pay close attention to 'issues of youth exclusion and unemployment, especially in urban areas, which have the potential to increase religious extremism and violence among marginalized groups'".

[FSI](#) economic indicators overall show a weak economy, even though there have been slight improvements.

[HDI](#) shows that only 44% of the total population are employed. In addition, 53% of employment is considered vulnerable. This economic vulnerability is also confirmed in the low literacy rate of 52.1% of all adults, with even a lower rate of 41.6% among women (BTI 2018).

## Social and cultural landscape

The continued existence of the practice of [slavery](#) is one of the major problems in the country that causes social division and acrimony. The issue of slavery is also a cause for division along ethnic lines among Mauritians: While Moors and Berbers are of Arab descent; the descendants of the former slaves (of the Moors) - who are also called Haratines.- are of ethnic African descent.

[FSI](#) cohesion indicators show that factionalized elites are a major factor of social instability and although demographic pressures (among ethnic groups) are somewhat improved, their potential to disrupt social life remains high.

According to [HDI](#) life expectancy is low at 64.7 and children can only expect 8.5 years of education.

## Technological landscape

According to the [Human Development Index](#), only 21% of the population has Internet access. However, North Africa is developing quickly in this regard, 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. Most notorious in this regard is the case of [Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'khaitir](#). In addition, the government closed down the Internet for two weeks in June 2019 to quell protests after the election of President Mohamed Ould El-Ghazouani.

## 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 threat that Mauritania might slide towards a more radical Islamic path since sympathy for radical Islam among the population is rising.

## 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.

Overall, the signs are that Christians will probably face more pressure in the 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 - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985>
- Political and legal landscape: EIU - <https://country.eiu.com/mauritania>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-western-africa/mauritania/>
- Political and legal landscape: FSI - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Religious landscape: MEC reports - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/mauritania/>
- Economic landscape: World Bank - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mauritania/overview>
- Economic landscape: BTI Mauritania 2018 - [http://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2018/pdf/BTI\\_2018\\_Mauritania.pdf](http://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2018/pdf/BTI_2018_Mauritania.pdf)
- Economic landscape: FSI - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Economic landscape: HDI - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MRT>
- Social and cultural landscape: slavery - <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/haratin/>
- Social and cultural landscape: FSI - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Social and cultural landscape: HDI - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MRT>
- Technological landscape: Human Development Index - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MRT>
- Technological landscape: Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'khaitir - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49165640>

## WWL 2020: 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. 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.

### Church spectrum today

Church networks: Mauritania	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	5,200	52.0
Protestant	2,300	23.0
Independent	2,100	21.0
Unaffiliated	340	3.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,940</b>	<b>99.4</b>

<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,300	13.0
Renewalist movement	2,600	26.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

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

# WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Mauritania

## Reporting period

1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 68 points, Mauritania ranked 24 in WWL 2020.

The country scored 67 points in WWL 2019. Mauritania's score increased slightly as the country remains hostile towards Christianity. In addition to the increased pressure caused by a tightening of the blasphemy and apostasy law in the last reporting period, access to more detailed information has also had an effect on scoring. On the other hand, Mauritania's low score for violence may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

## Persecution engines

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

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

### Islamic oppression (Very strong):

This is the primary persecution engine operating in Mauritania. Mauritania is a self-proclaimed Islamic Republic and Islamism is the dominant political ideology in the country. Non-Muslims experience intimidation and persecution particularly at the hands of Islamic groups. Large numbers of Mauritians have joined 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 and ethnic antagonism (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.



**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 focussing 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 2018](#), p. 10). Powerful people with connections to the army and presidency can enrich themselves and act with impunity.

**Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):**

The current government is determined to hold on to power and tries to shore up its legitimacy among Islamic groups by persecuting Christians.

**Drivers of persecution**

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

*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 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 to Islam.

#### **Drivers of Clan and ethnic antagonism:**

- **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.

## Geographical hotspots of persecution

Tribal and family ties are especially strict in the rural part of the country, but even in Nouakchott pressure is 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 persecution that is related with the increasing Islamism in the country.

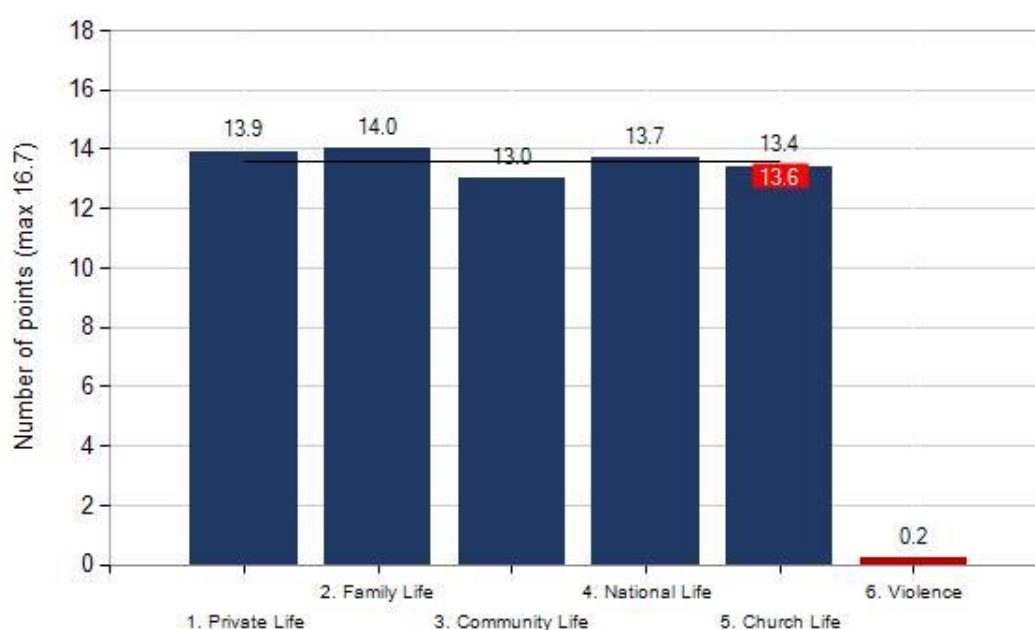
**Historical Christian communities:** This category of Christians does not exist in Mauritania.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christian converts from a Muslim background are most exposed to persecution and face an enormous amount of 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 2020 Persecution Pattern for Mauritania



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Mauritania shows:

- The average pressure on Christians remained at a very high level (13.6 points), rising from 13.3 in WWL 2019. The reason for this increase is the overall rise in pressure in all spheres of life through the effects of the tightening of the blasphemy and apostasy law.
- Although all spheres of life show very high or extreme levels of pressure, pressure is highest in Private and Family life. This reflects the enormous 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.
- The score for violence went down from 0.5 points in WWL 2019 to 0.2 in WWL 2020. However, this very low score 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, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. 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 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

### Private sphere:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to discuss their faith with those other than immediate family members (extended family, others) (Block 1.8 / Score: 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.
- ***Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or is punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another (Block 1.1 / Score: 3.5 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.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.) (Block 1.4 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Expatriate Christians have more freedom in this regard than converts, but revealing your faith can lead to persecution for both communities of Christians.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Highly risky for converts from Islam to Christianity, as it is a clear sign of apostasy. Expatriate Christians, especially those from a Sub-Saharan background, are likely to face discrimination and abuse when publicly identifiable as Christian.

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

#### **Family sphere:**

- ***Have babies and children of Christians automatically been registered under the state or majority religion (Block 2.1 / Score: 3.5 points):*** All Mauritians are considered to be Muslim.
- ***Have Christian children been pressured to attend anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 3.5 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.
- ***Have spouses of converts been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce (Block 2.11 / Score: 3.5 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.
- ***Have children of Christians been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith (Block 2.9 / Score: 3.25 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.

*Christian parents find it difficult to raise their children in accordance with their religious beliefs. This is a problem for both Mauritanian converts and foreign Christians, especially those from other Sub-Saharan African countries. Expatriate Christians have relative freedom in this regard (compared to converts) since they can conduct marriages, baptisms and funerals with Christian rites.*

#### **Community sphere:**

- ***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.) (Block 3.1 / Score: 3.5 points):*** This happens to both converts as well as expatriate Christians. There is a high level of social hostility towards Christians.
- ***Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events (Block 3.5 / Score: 3.5 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).
- ***Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith (Block 3.7 / Score: 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.

- **Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts) (Block 3.11 / Score: 3.50 points):** Known converts would most probably be heavily discriminated against and be unable to run a business, especially since Mauritanian society is steeped in corruption and clientelism. Expatriate Christians from a Sub-Saharan background are both discriminated against because of the color of their skin as well as their faith.

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

#### **National sphere:**

- **The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits the freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 4 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".
- **Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public (Block 4.8 / Score: 3.75 points):** Christians have to operate carefully in Mauritanian society. Criticism of the government or Islam is impossible without punishment.
- **Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols (Block 4.12 / Score: 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.
- **Officials at any level have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identity cards, etc. (Block 4.2 / Score: 3.5 points):** The state does not recognize (and hardly tolerates) converts who dare to make their conversion public.

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

### Church sphere:

- **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 (Block 5.3 / Score: 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.
- **It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government (Block 5.2 / Score: 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.
- **Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings (Block 5.5 / Score: 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.
- **Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts (Block 5.7 / Score: 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.

*Christians from a Muslim background gather in secret, fearing that they may be being watched. Foreign Christians are only allowed to meet in specific public places of worship - though there are frequent home meetings that are not hindered unless the music and preaching is too loud.*

## Violence

*The following 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.*

Mauritania	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	0	0	0	0	0
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	0	0	1	0
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	0	0	0	0

*Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.*

Violence against Christians has remained at a very low level. There are two reasons for this: Firstly, all converts know the consequences if their faith is discovered, and so do other Christians if they do not operate carefully (e.g. abstaining from evangelism). Thus, by 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.

## 5 Year trends

### Chart 1:

The table below shows a steady increase in average pressure, with the level rising from 10.6 points in WWL 2017 to the almost extreme level of 13.6 points in WWL 2020.

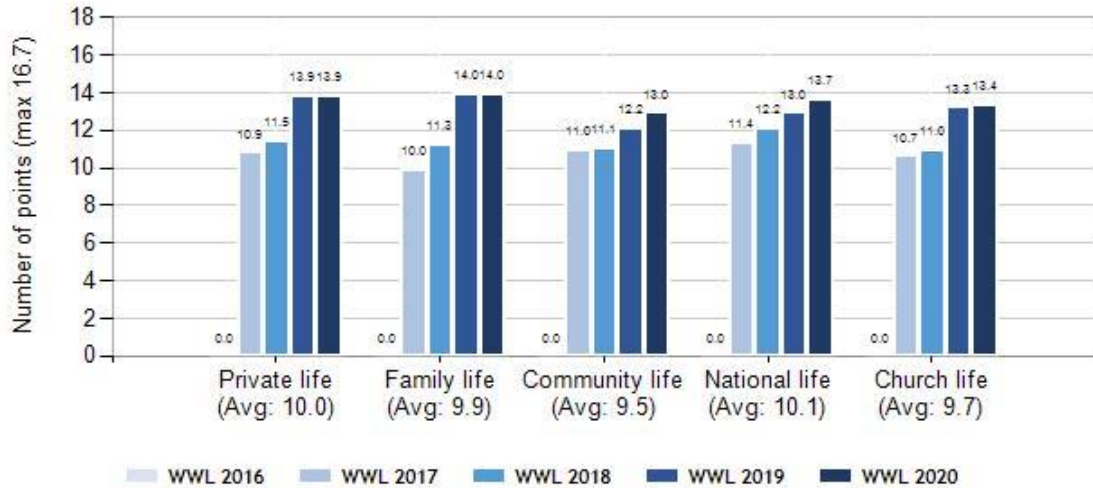
WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Mauritania	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	13.6
2019	13.3
2018	11.4
2017	10.8
2016	--



**Chart 2:**

The levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* have seen increases in the period WWL 2017-WWL 2019. However, particularly in the *private, family and church spheres of life* the pressure in WWL 2020 would seem to be levelling off. The levelling off is at an extreme level in the *private* and *family* spheres.

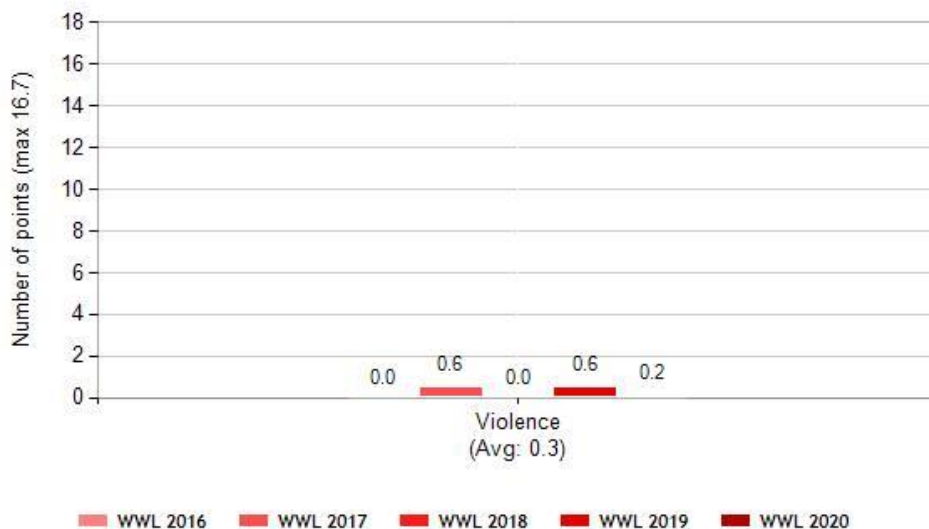
WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Mauritania (Spheres of life)



**Chart 3:**

The low number of violent incidents recorded in Mauritania has not changed dramatically over the years. The scores for violence have thus remained more or less stable at a very low level. However, this low score may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Mauritania (Violence)



## Gender profile of persecution

### Female Pressure Points:

- ***Denied food/water***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Incarceration by family/house arrest***
- ***Trafficking***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence – sexual***
- ***Violence – verbal***

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 honor of 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, subject to caning, exaggerated domestic work, excruciating servitude and kept in isolation. 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 labeled a prostitute.

On the other hand, 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. The presence of modern-day slavery (despite laws against it) makes ruthless detention and exploitation of female converts more likely - and very hidden.

### Male Pressure Points:

- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Economic harassment via business, job, or work access***
- ***Forced out of home/expulsion***
- ***Forced to flee town/country***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Violence – physical***

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. Many Christian men are expelled from their homes. 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.

Other non-Arab Christian men in the country are easily put under pressure to leave Mauritania by excluding ethnic Africans from finding work or by forcing migrant workers to pay high fees for staying in the country. 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 [2018 International Religious Freedom Country report](#) (p. 6): "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 third 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.

## Future outlook for the church

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 rather a worsening, although the situation will probably not change in practice. The influence of radical Islamic groups is growing and this could seriously worsen the situation in the long term.
- **Clan and ethnic antagonism:** 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. Racism and *Clan and ethnic antagonism* will most probably remain, 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 persecuting Christians. This attitude is not likely to change.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: BTI Mauritania 2018 - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/MRT/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: 2018 International Religious Freedom Country report - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MAURITANIA-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

## Additional reports and articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>  
(password: freedom).

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/mauritania>.

### Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Mauritania>  
(password: freedom).