

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

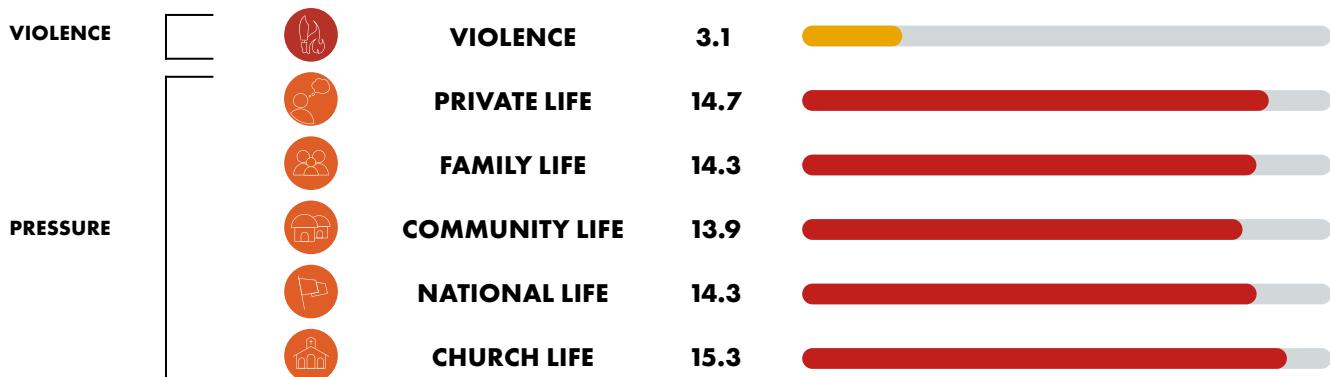
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
21

MAURITANIA



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

Converts from Islam to Christianity face severe opposition from their families and society. Recent incidents have highlighted high levels of social hostility towards Christians in Mauritania, including ongoing social hostility following the publication of a baptism video and the exhumation of the body of a convert from Islam to Christianity. This restrictive environment makes it impossible for them to live out their faith. Public expressions of faith by non-Mauritanian Christians, including migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, also carry the risk of being viewed as proselytization of Muslims and can lead to imprisonment and deportation. The government has indicated it will enforce strict apostasy laws. Since 2018, these laws include the death penalty with no possibility of leniency based on repentance, making execution mandatory for any Muslim convicted of leaving Islam or committing blasphemy.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Mohamed Ould Cheikh el Ghazouani

POPULATION

5,128,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

11,100¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	11,100	0.2
Muslims	5,090,000	99.3
Ethnic religionists	20,900	0.4
Others	6,000	0.1
	Total	100%

Source²

Mauritania is a country in northwest Africa, connecting Arab North Africa with Sub-Saharan West Africa. 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.

The first recorded Christian impact on Mauritania was in 1442 when the Portuguese founded the fort of Arguin, where they derived gold, gum Arabic and slaves. In 1904, Mauritania became part of French West Africa, though French influence was mostly confined to coastal regions and Saharan trade routes. During colonial rule, the Christian presence was limited to Roman Catholic expatriates, with little missionary activity. After independence in 1960, the situation for Christians became more challenging, but the only Catholic diocese was established in Nouakchott in 1965.

Mauritania, despite its wealth in mineral resources, remains one of the world's poorest nations. Its society is deeply traditional and tribal. Slavery, though officially abolished, persists and remains [a major cause of social division](#). White Moors and Berbers of Arab descent dominate Mauritania's political and economic spheres, while the Haratin, black Moors of Sub-Saharan African origin, are largely marginalized, despite making up around 70% of the population.

Most Mauritians are Sunni Muslims. The government strictly opposes proselytizing and hostility towards converts from Islam to Christianity is high. Apostasy is punishable by death, though this penalty has not been enforced in recent years. The constitution designates Islam as the state religion and the [Penal Code prohibits apostasy and blasphemy](#). Laws restrict the printing, distribution and importation of non-Islamic religious materials, though private ownership is allowed.

Most Christians in Mauritania today are foreigners from neighboring Sub-Saharan countries such as Senegal and Guinea Bissau. They are allowed limited religious freedom, worshipping only in designated compounds and are forbidden from sharing their faith with Mauritians, who are presumed to be Muslim. Roman Catholics form the majority of the Christian population. Local Christian converts from Islam are few and face intense family, societal, and governmental pressure.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Islamic oppression is the main source of persecution in Mauritania, a self-proclaimed Islamic Republic where Islamism is the dominant political ideology. Non-Muslims face intimidation and persecution, especially from hardline groups. Large numbers of Mauritanians have joined violent Islamist militant groups both in North Africa as well as in Syria and Iraq. While the government combats Islamist militancy, it also gives radical Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood space to operate publicly. Converts from Islam face the harshest persecution, rejected by both family and society.

CLAN OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY

Mauritania's traditional, tribal society mixes ethnic and religious tensions, with urbanization still recent. When a Muslim converts to Christianity, the individual faces not only family and government pressure but also collective shame and persecution from their entire tribe or ethnic group. Slavery, still linked to ethnicity, exacerbates these divisions, with proponents of slavery justifying it through Islam. Campaigns against slavery have provoked backlash from Islamist groups, while Christian Sub-Saharan Africans living in Mauritania face both racial and religious discrimination.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Tribal, religious and personal connections dominate Mauritanian society, fueling widespread nepotism and corruption, including within the government. Anti-corruption efforts tend to target only minor offenders. Journalists investigating high-level corruption risk intimidation, detention, and defamation charges, while those with ties to the military and presidency enrich themselves and often act with impunity.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

The government is highly protective of its power and often intensifies persecution if it perceives any Christian influence as a threat or embarrassment. To maintain legitimacy with Islamist groups, authorities actively suppress Christianity.

How the situation varies by region

Tribal and family ties are especially strict in rural areas, but even in the capital city, Nouakchott, the pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity can be very high. Kidnapping by militants or other criminal groups is a risk throughout the country, especially for foreigners, although the west of the country around the capital Nouakchott is generally safe. 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, posing a threat to Christians.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

The Roman Catholic Church has five churches. However, no denomination is allowed to construct new churches.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

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

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Within Mauritania's tribal society, women are subject to the authority of fathers and husbands, making female converts the most vulnerable. They may be deprived of food, bullied or put under house arrest. Most women do not have a choice in marriage and may be forced to marry a Muslim man, risking ostracization if she refuses. Married female converts can easily be divorced and end up with no means to survive, and polygamy is still practiced. Making it additionally challenging, Muslim women (also Christians from a Muslim background) cannot legally marry a Christian man.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian leaders from Muslim backgrounds are especially at risk of detainment, subjected to extra surveillance and death threats. Male converts also face familial and community pressures, including ostracization, expulsion from the home and physical violence. They further risk losing employment opportunities, being forced out of government jobs or experiencing the community boycotting their business as a form of punishment. Charges of apostasy can be brought in a religious court and lengthy prison sentences given, causing some to flee. A strong "Arabization" movement means many Sub-Saharan African Christians are pressured to leave, while many of them face difficulties, with their faith making them extra vulnerable, with pressures on church leaders being particularly strong.

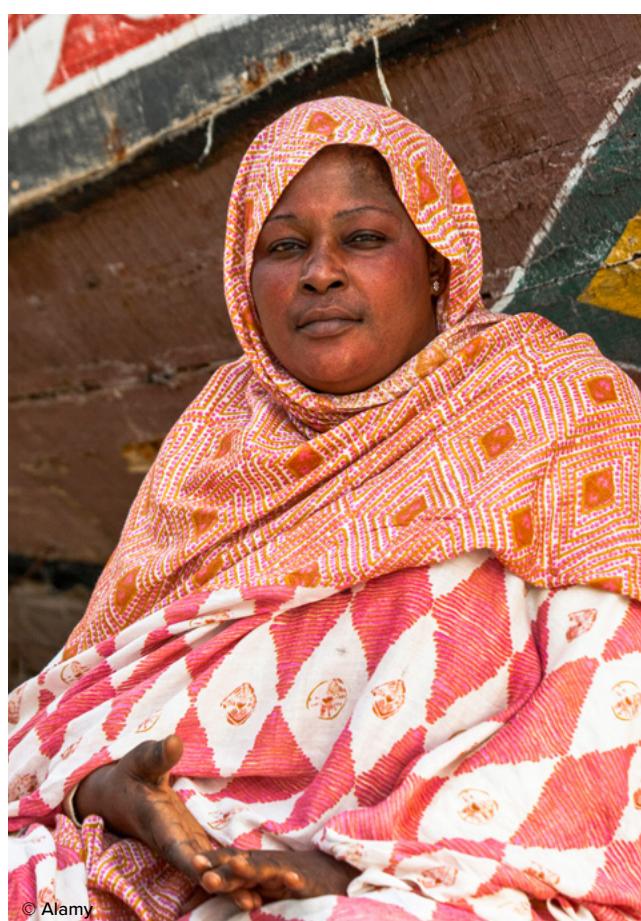
Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	21	76
2025	23	74
2024	23	72
2023	20	72
2022	23	70

The score rose by 1.9 points. Several incidents of communal violence and state oppression caused an increase in the violence score from 2.8 points to 3.7. Similarly, all spheres of life saw increases, with the pressure in church life increasing greatly. Both Mauritanian and Sub-Saharan African Christians faced extreme pressure, forcing the church to operate very carefully.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **December 2023:** 15 Mauritanian Christian leaders and relatives were arrested in Sélibaby after a [baptism video surfaced online](#). Although they were released the same month, the arrests and hostile reactions from Islamists, religious leaders, society and the government deeply shook the small Christian community. Even in the WWL 2026 reporting period, the incident's effects remained serious. Social hostility was high, with verbal and physical attacks. Most of those arrested lost jobs or faced work bans, and their children suffered severe bullying at school.
- **April 2025:** A demonstration against Christians culminated in the exhumation of a deceased Christian's body, which was dragged through the streets and reburied outside the city ([MEC, 9 April 2025](#))
- Sub-Saharan African Christians residing in the country regularly experience faith-based discrimination, including losing employment, receiving inadequate or no medical care or being hindered in attending church activities.

PRIVATE LIFE

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

FAMILY LIFE

All Mauritians and their children are automatically considered Muslim and registered as such. Christian children must attend Islamic classes at a public school and are more likely to face discrimination and harassment. Conversion to Christianity is grounds for

divorce in Mauritania, and a parent whose conversion becomes public may lose custody of their children.

COMMUNITY LIFE

There is extreme communal pressure against Mauritians who do not follow Sunni Islam. Violations can take the form of ostracization, social discrimination, economic exclusion or even violence. It is heightened by the fact that Mauritanian society is divided along ethnic lines, and its economy and government are steeped in corruption and clientelism. Expatriate Christians from a Sub-Saharan background are discriminated against because of both the color of their skin and their faith.

NATIONAL LIFE

Mauritania's criminal law sanctions capital punishment for apostasy and blasphemy. The legal framework is very strict: any Muslim who leaves Islam or is accused of blasphemy faces capital punishment, with no allowance for repentance. Christians must be cautious, ensuring their words are not interpreted as criticism of Islam or the government. Public expression of any faith other than Islam is banned, and all religious gatherings require government approval.

CHURCH LIFE

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



International obligations & rights violated

Mauritania has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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:

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

Situation of other religious minorities

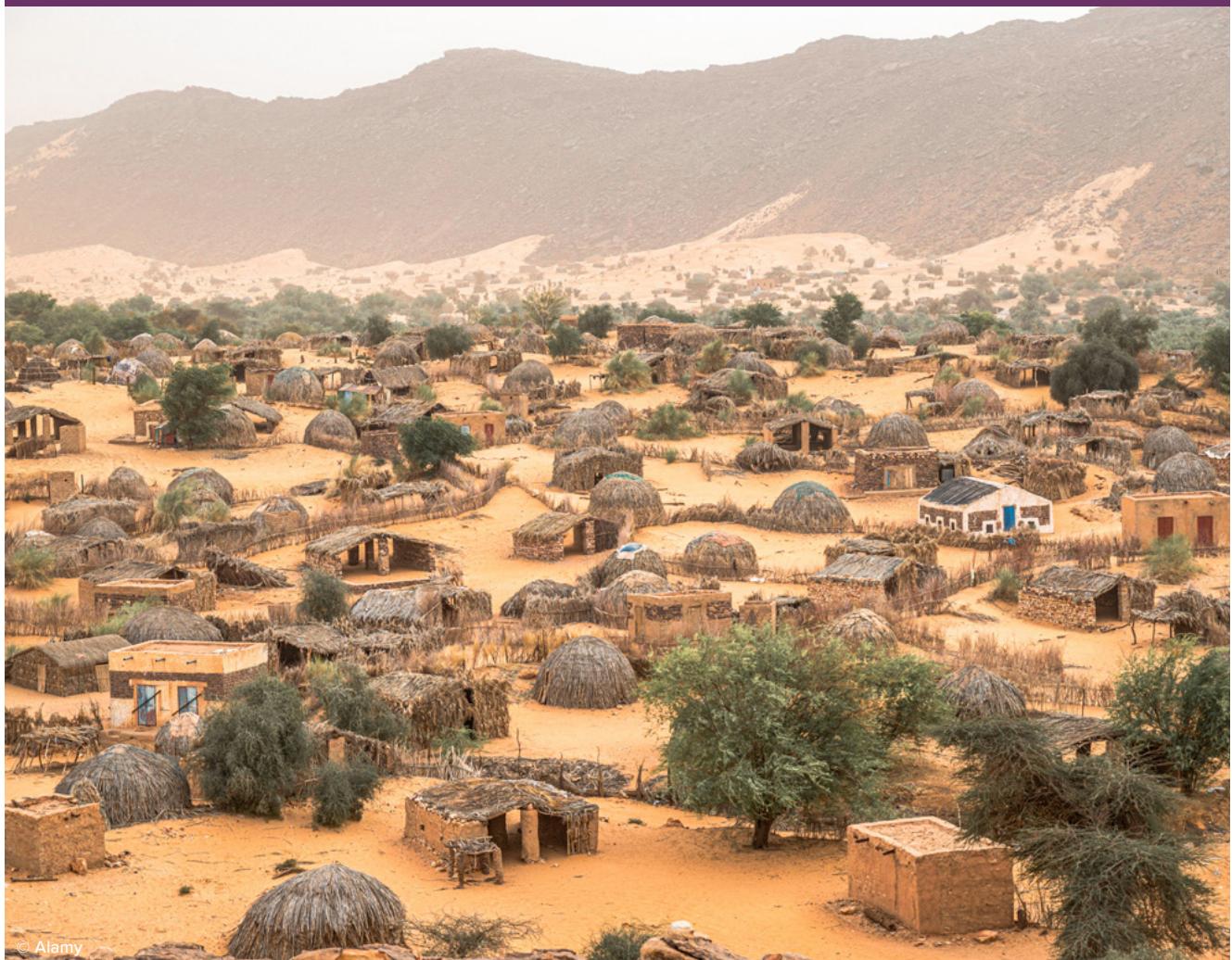
There is a very small but growing Shia Muslim minority in Mauritania. The Mauritanian government has historically had warm diplomatic relations with Iran and was hesitant to target Shia Muslims. However, Sunni religious leaders in the country have increasingly vocalized their denunciations of the minority group, calling for the government to impose restrictions. In addition, several people accused of atheism have been arrested and imprisoned in the recent past.



Open Doors in Mauritania

In cooperation with local partners and churches, Open Doors is supporting the church in North Africa through the following activities:

- Leadership: We organize leadership retreats, training and mentoring
- Discipleship: We provide encouragement through face-to-face visits, discipleship training, support theological initiatives, persecution preparedness training and distribute Bibles and Christian literature
- Ministry: We provide trauma counseling training for women, legal aid for persecuted Christians, and practical support. We also organize women's support groups, family conferences, and pre-marriage courses to strengthen relationships and community resilience
- Livelihood: We offer micro-loans to start small businesses, vocational training, medical help and relief items
- Raising prayer support for believers in Mauritania



© Alamy

ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.