



## MALDIVES: Country Dossier

May 2018



**Open Doors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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# World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64				
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55		51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57				
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55		50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54		48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

## WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries<sup>1</sup>

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

<sup>1</sup> These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

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## Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)<sup>1</sup> including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))<sup>2</sup>. Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)<sup>3</sup> and WWR staff.

MALDIVES		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	78	13
WWL 2017	76	13
WWL 2016	76	13
WWL 2015	78	11
WWL 2014	77	7

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

<sup>2</sup> WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

# WWL 2018: Keys to understanding MALDIVES

## Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12651486>

## Recent country history

The Maldives are a politically torn country. After the ousting of the first democratically elected president, Mohamed Nasheed, in February 2012, his successors have frequently reiterated the importance of Islam for the country and their plans to promote the religion. Opposition forces (or simply those perceived as a danger to the rulers) have been driven out of the country and have founded a United Maldives Opposition in May 2016, headed by Nasheed who was granted asylum in the UK. Whatever this may mean for the country's future, for the time being, it increases the government's paranoia. In August 2016, a new "Defamation Law" was passed by parliament, especially protecting Islam as the country's religion.

## The religious landscape

The country is 100% Sunni Muslim and each Maldivian citizen wanting to turn away from it will lose his or her citizenship. Among the many expatriate workers, there are Christians as well, but if they dare to meet at all, they have to be very cautious and inconspicuous.

## The political landscape

Politics in the Maldives always carries religious undertones; it would seem that Islam has to be defended or promoted in every possible way. As politics are often family business, rifts, changing coalitions and surprise moves are quite normal. Especially in recent years it has not been unusual for a minister to lose his job for a variety of reasons, including alleged treason. This points to another issue Maldivian politics is having to face - the paranoia of its leaders. Staying in power seems to be the overarching goal and every means is used to do that. And if this means that journalists have to be kidnapped or murdered or – as in April 2017 – a prominent liberal blogger is stabbed to death, so be it. The small Christian minority has virtually no room to breathe under such pressure.

## The socio-economic landscape

For years now, the Maldives have been facing serious social problems, such as drug addiction, cases of sexual abuse and high divorce rates without being able to find solutions. Reportedly, drug addiction is also a problem among some of the few Christians in the country.

An unpublished 2009 study on violence against children - possibly not published due to its grim findings – states that one in seven children of secondary school age in the country has been sexually abused at some time in their lives. It also discovered that the rate of sexual abuse for

girls is almost twice as high (20%) compared to that of boys (11%). Girls are particularly at risk in the capital, Malé. The study also discovered that 47% of Maldivian children under the age of 18 have undergone physical or emotional punishment at home, school or in the community. It is also more common among students attending secondary school in the atolls, with one in four reporting they had been hit by adults or other children during the past year. The figure for Malé was 14%.

The Maldives has the highest divorce rate in the world, with a nine out of ten ratio – some Maldivians have allegedly “tied the knot” sixty times! Following Islamic custom, a husband can divorce his wife by simply saying “I divorce you!” three times. The high divorce rate is blamed on the nature of the husbands’ work in the shipping and tourism industries. They are required to be away from home for an extended period of time. This results in a lack of trust and in financial difficulty for many women.

According to the Department of Immigration in June 2015, the Maldives are home to 124,000 migrant workers, most of them employed in the tourist sector. In relation to the number of inhabitants of the Maldives, an estimated 358,000 people in 2015, this is a surprisingly high number. Even more so as Transparency Maldives, a local NGO, estimates that the real number of migrant workers is closer to 200,000. Given these figures, it is not surprising that human trafficking [the illegal supply of migrant workers] is the second most lucrative economic sector after tourism, according to official government figures from 2011. The country depends very much on tourism and so the latest numbers on tourist arrivals from March 2017<sup>4</sup>, although increasing, came as a disappointment since the government’s targets will not be reached.

## Concluding remarks

The killing of a liberal blogger in April 2017 sent shockwaves through the country and served as a serious setback for anyone hoping for an opening-up of the country in terms of democratization, human rights and open opposition to the government. At the same time, annoying the Saudi King by prematurely announcing a major deal (selling or leasing an atoll for 50 billion USD) may not have been the wisest decision and has added to the country’s instability. Additionally, the fight against violent Islamic radicals has to continue and the government is well aware of this danger. One observer referred to the Maldives as [“a Paradise lost to terrorism”](#)<sup>5</sup>. This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives do have one of the highest per capita rate of Islamic militants fighting abroad. In June 2016, Maldivian fighters even [threatened](#)<sup>6</sup> the government with attacks calling the country’s leaders the “evil powers they are at war with”.

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://tradingeconomics.com/maldives/tourist-arrivals>, last accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-maldives-losing-a-tourist-paradise-to-terrorism/>, last accessed 1 December 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.dhivehisitee.com/people/maldives-fighters-in-syria-warns-government/>, last accessed 1 December 2016.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
376,000	A few thousand	/

Source: Open Doors estimate of number of Christians 2017

### How did Christians get there?

This is officially a 100% Sunni Muslim country. In the interest of security, no information can be published for this section.

### What church networks exist today? <sup>7</sup>

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

In the interest of security, no information can be published for this section.

### Religious context (no details can be shown)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>8</sup>
A few thousand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: Open Doors for number of Christians 2017

In the 12th century, Sunni Muslim traders brought Islam to the Maldives which had been a Buddhist country for centuries. The one-time strong Sufi tradition is declining as the influence of Saudi Wahhabism grows, despite a recent cooling of relations to Saudi Arabia when the government announced a massive Saudi investment in Maldives prematurely, thus angering the Saudi King. The country is officially 100% Sunni Muslim, all Maldivian citizens have to be Muslim. The language of the Maldives is Dhivehi: The complete Bible in this language is not yet available.

<sup>7</sup> **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. **Evangelicals:** 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. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

<sup>8</sup> This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

## Notes on the current situation

Normal church life (i.e. worshipping together, fellowship, youth work, outreach) is all impossible for Maldivian believers. The few hidden Christians often struggle with drug addiction and other social problems, which are common in Maldivian society. Importing Christian literature is officially forbidden. Reportedly even tourists have sometimes got into difficulties for just taking their own personal copy of the Bible with them. When entering the Maldives, tourists have to fill in a form asking if they are bringing to the Maldives “goods that are prohibited or subject to restriction such as religious material”. Expatriate Christians are also very cautious in worshipping and frequently desist from meeting in groups.

## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 78 / Position: 13**

WWL 2017 Points: 76 / Position: 13

WWL 2016 Points: 76 / Position: 13

## Where persecution comes from

The government of the Maldives insists that the country has to be run according to conservative Islamic tenets and that all citizens have to be Muslims. Therefore religious freedom does not exist, except for expatriate Christians who are only allowed to practice their faith in the utmost privacy behind closed doors – a strictly monitored activity. Reportedly, most have ceased meeting, since it was drawing too much attention from the authorities. Additionally, the government is currently bogged down in a political struggle with opposition forces and therefore cracks down on any perceived threat quickly and harshly. Radical Islamic preachers and clerics, whether homegrown or coming from the Middle East, are exerting strong socio-religious control and are influencing others with their radical views of Islam, making it impossible for Christians (especially converts) to show anything of their Christian faith due to fear of being monitored and handed over to the government authorities.

## How Christians are suffering

Though small in population, the Maldives consists of 1,700 small islands, but has one of the highest population densities worldwide, especially on its main island, Malé. The population thus forms close-knit, homogeneous island communities which serve as natural watchdogs for any deviation of its members, which naturally includes religious choice. Conversion to Christianity can thus easily result in being reported to Muslim leaders or authorities. Expatriate Christians, most of them working in the tourist sector and coming from India and Sri Lanka, are closely watched as well, making Christian fellowship very difficult.

## Examples

- Due to security issues and the very small Christian community living in the Maldives, hardly any examples can be given. Incidents of confiscating a Bible upon arrival as well as the detention and deportation of Christians can be mentioned as occurring in the WWL 2018 reporting period.
- In a country where according to Article 9(d) of the Constitution non-Muslims may not become a citizen of the Maldives and accordingly, if someone is found to have converted to Christianity, will be stripped of his or her citizenship as well punished for violating Sharia law, it is not hard to imagine that pressure is extremely high and converts remain well hidden. Some Maldivian Christians have preferred to leave the islands and stay abroad due to the enormous pressure they were put under.

## WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 78 / Position: 13**

WWL 2017 Points: 76 / Position: 13

WWL 2016 Points: 76 / Position: 13

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## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The increase of two points compared to the WWL 2017 score is due mainly to an increase of pressure on Christians in the *Family* and *Church spheres of life*. While the former affects converts, who have virtually no space at all to live out their Christian faith, the latter affects expatriates (often migrant workers) who lack possibilities for worshipping together without



fearing arrest and deportation. Consequently, the Maldives is one of the few countries where the *Church sphere* receives maximum points.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Maldives <sup>9</sup>	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Very Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Strong

### Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The Islamic government continues to perceive itself as the protector of Islam, instituting a set of laws that basically prohibits a Maldivian from leaving Islam and converting to another religion. To be Maldivian is equated with being a Muslim, leaving no room for any deviation, and a convert will face harsh consequences including losing citizenship. Officially there are no Maldivian Christians, only expatriate Christians. The growing Islamization was illustrated in the WWL 2018 reporting period by a public outcry from concerned parents over pictures of two Christian churches in social studies textbooks for Grades 1-4. The books had recently been introduced by the new management at Gateway International School without official approval from the appropriate Maldivian ministry. A local news website accused the school of being “a gateway to turning Maldivians [in]to Christians”. The books had to be [recalled](#)<sup>10</sup>. The appointment of a radical cleric to the [highest Islamic council](#)<sup>11</sup> in December 2016 also fits this observation. This reflects the difficult situation the Christian minority in the Maldives finds itself in. When a company gave staff Swiss army knives as gifts in the WWL 2018 reporting period, reportedly all staff scratched the white emblem off the front of the knives because it appeared to be a cross.

### Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

Political freedoms continue to be embattled. Government opposition members were banned from entering the Parliament building in August 2017. President Yameen tries to win voters by elaborating on religion, and in his [fourth state-of-the-nation address](#)<sup>12</sup>, he announced a program to “promote Islamic unity and foster religious and national spirit” among the public. Freedom of religion is restricted still further since the “protection of religion” is purely understood to mean the protection of Islam. The protection against destroying “religious

<sup>9</sup> The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/society/maldives-school-recalls-textbooks-after-controversy-over-pictures-of-churches-128314>, 9 January 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

<sup>11</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/radical-cleric-appointed-to-top-islamic-council-128016>, 14 December 2016, last accessed 25 August 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/stability-development-and-prosperity-yameens-state-of-the-nation-address-128621>, 6 February 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

unity” is also worrying, as this wording indicates that the authorities will oppose any perceived deviation from their understanding of Islam. All these laws and rhetoric not only show that Islam will be protected at all costs, but also reflects how *Islamic oppression* is blended with *Dictatorial paranoia*, because Islam is being used as a justification for limiting political freedoms. (For further details see: Section 3: Context.)

#### **Organized corruption and crime (Strong):**

Corruption runs rampant through the Maldives, from the highest levels of government on down. Almost anything can be accomplished through sufficient bribes, favors and/or threats. Contracts and other agreements can be broken on a whim and government officials hire young street gang members to do dirty work for them (e.g. roughing people up, committing property crimes against designated targets, selling contraband to raise cash). Many street gangs are controlled by government leaders (at all levels), and especially target anyone who speaks out against the government or against strict Islam. Radical Islamic groups that want to ferret out Christians and atheists also have connections and influence with gangs and corrupt or brutal police networks. Some criminals (individual or in a gang) act for their own benefit, but without specific intent to promote anarchy.

## Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Maldives	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Not at all
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very strong
Own (extended) family	Very strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The government of the Maldives insists that the country has to be run by conservative Islamic tenets and that all citizens have to be Muslims. Therefore religious freedom does not exist, except for expatriate Christians who are strictly monitored and intimidated in such a way that they even do not dare to meet behind closed doors. Additionally, the government is deeply involved in a political struggle with opposition forces and therefore cracks down on any perceived threat ever quicker and more strongly. Fundamental Islamic preachers and clerics, whether homegrown or coming from the Middle East, are exerting strong socio-religious control of their groups and are influencing others with their radical views of Islam, making it impossible for Christians - especially converts - to show their faith due to the fear of monitoring and of being handed over to the authorities. Family and community are drivers of persecution for converts as well, if they are discovered. As already mentioned, radical Muslims

are linking up with gangs and using them to ferret out Christians and atheists or anyone suspected of being one.

## Context

The Maldives are a country in turmoil. Internationally, they still have the image of being a holiday paradise; however, the country follows a strict form of Islam and is struggling with unrest and many political challenges. Not even a month after his arrest, in March 2015, former President Mohammed Nasheed was sentenced to thirteen years in prison without getting a fair trial. Those protesting were sacked, as were several high-ranking politicians including the Minister of Defense and the Vice-President. Former President Nasheed was permitted to travel to London in order to receive health treatment in January 2016, where he was granted political asylum in the United Kingdom in May 2016. Shortly afterwards several (mainly exiled) politicians, including himself, launched a platform called “United Maldives Opposition”. This platform may not be 100% unified, but despite being exiled has managed to destabilize the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) even further. The PPM has been experiencing serious divisions and President Yameen even faces losing his majority in parliament. He brought about an exit from the Commonwealth<sup>13</sup> at the end of his term in October 2016, reflecting the quickly deteriorating human rights situation.

In May 2017, the opposition had a successful win in local elections. In July 2017, ten members of parliament decided to switch allegiance from the ruling party and [side with the opposition](#)<sup>14</sup>, a move which was not accepted by the Constitutional Court, [which banned them instead](#)<sup>15</sup>. [Banning parliamentarians](#)<sup>16</sup> from entering the Parliament building - and thus hindering them from fulfilling the very duties for which they have been elected – as happened in August 2017 - is glaring proof of the fractured state of the Maldives. The government seems to be in a state of *Dictatorial paranoia* acting according to the motto “Who is not for us, is against us” and ignoring all criticism and warnings from [the international community](#)<sup>17</sup>.

According to government estimates in August 2016, the Maldives are home to more than 130,000 migrant workers, most of them employed in the tourist sector. In relation to the number of inhabitants of the Maldives, an estimated 382,000 people in 2018, this is a surprisingly high number. Even more so as Transparency Maldives, a local NGO, estimates that the real number of migrant workers is closer to 200,000. Given these figures, it is not surprising that human trafficking [the illegal supply of migrant workers] is the second most lucrative

<sup>13</sup> The Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary intergovernmental organization made up of 52 member states (mostly territories of the former British Empire) and operates by intergovernmental consensus. There had been calls in 2016 to place the Maldives under political pressure due to a “severe democracy deficit”, as reported by Maldives Independent on 28 September 2016, see: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/commonwealth-envoy-briefed-watchdog-of-severe-democracy-deficit-in-maldives-126808>, last accessed 25 August 2017.

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/ppm-refuses-to-accept-en-masse-resignation-of-lawmakers-131479>, 13 July 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/mps-will-forfeit-seat-for-leaving-party-supreme-court-rules-131486>, 13 July 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/dozen-opposition-mps-face-charges-for-entering-parliament-building-132008>, 14 August 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/western-powers-call-on-maldives-to-restore-independence-of-parliament-131691>, 26 July 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

economic sector after tourism, according to official government figures from 2011. These figures also imply that the lack of freedom of religion in the country affects not only the very small number of Maldivian Christians but also Christians from among the migrant workers. (The large number of migrant workers causes certain social problems which are discussed below in the Section “Future Outlook”.)

There are no recognized religious minorities of any kind in the Maldives. All nationals are required to be Muslim by law. Anyone giving evidence of support for any religion or philosophy besides Islam (e.g. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, atheism) will be persecuted in the same way as Christians and most of them prefer to go into exile rather than face jail or even death. Atheists or people seen as atheists have been killed for their convictions (see “Future Outlook”).

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### **Communities of expatriate Christians:**

Expatriate Christians often come from India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. These communities are monitored closely, but most of them have the freedom to worship provided they stay strictly amongst themselves. Expatriate Christians do not have any contact with indigenous converts from Islam.

### **Historical Christian communities:**

There are no historical churches in the Maldives.

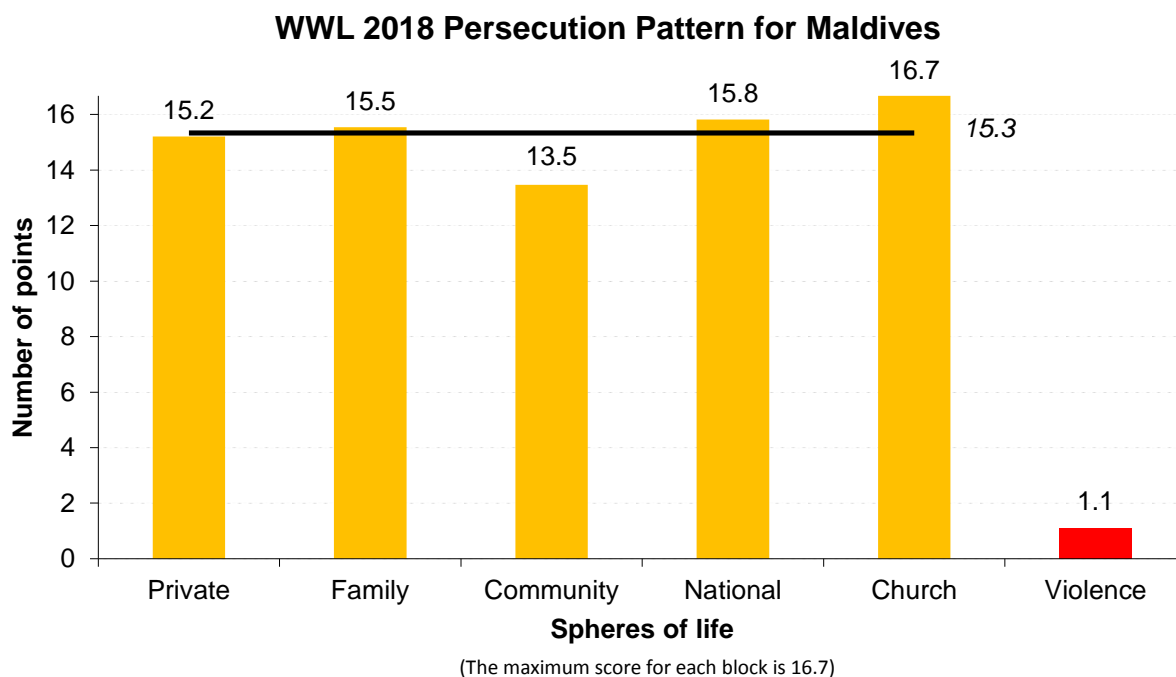
### **Communities of converts to Christianity:**

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

### **Non-traditional Christian communities:**

These do not exist in the Maldives.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Maldives shows:

- Pressure on Christians in the Maldives increased in all *Spheres of life* except the *National sphere*, causing the average pressure to be at an extreme level. It rose from a score of 15.1 in WWL 2017 to 15.3 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church sphere*, where it reached the maximum score, reflecting that in practice no meetings are possible and even most expatriate Christians prefer not to organize meetings out of fear of repercussions. Apart from that, scores in the *National*, *Family* and *Private spheres* are at an extreme level. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private* and *Family spheres*. All politicians tirelessly announce that they are keeping the Maldives 100% Muslim, leaving effectively no space for any deviation.
- The score for violence against Christians increased from 0.7 in WWL 2017 to 1.1, but persecution has never been very violent in the Maldives.

### Private sphere:

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

sharing about their faith to others, and their job contracts even stipulate this condition. Meeting with other Christians is a major challenge in these circumstances since, on the one hand it is dangerous for the individual, and on the other hand it may disclose or endanger a Christian meeting. One case was reported where two friends were both active Christians but hid their faith from one another out of fear. Private meetings are theoretically allowed, but participants need to be very cautious not to raise suspicions and as intimidation has increased, most Christians prefer not to meet at all.

In November 2016, [religious scholars](#)<sup>18</sup> said that “those who want religious freedom in Maldives should go and live in other countries that grant it. Hence, those who want to practice other religions are free to leave the country. Only non-Muslims have the right to practice whatever religion they want to. If a Muslim leaves Islam that is blasphemy. If they do not repent, they should be killed.” And in December 2016, the [defense minister](#)<sup>19</sup> said: “The government of Maldives has taken necessary steps to ensure that Maldives remain as a hundred percent Islamic country and that one important step taken to protect the religion in Maldives is explicitly stating in the constitution that the state religion is Islam. You can be a Maldivian only if you believe in Allah. No laws that are contradictory to Islam can be made in the Maldives. Hence, Islam is protected in Maldives very well.”

#### **Family sphere:**

Article 9 (d) of the Constitution states that a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives. Accordingly, if Maldivians are found to have converted to Christianity, they could be stripped of their citizenship as well as punished under the laws of *Sharia*. As every Maldivian is automatically understood to be a Muslim, registration for converts is out of the question. Similarly, expatriate Christians are not allowed to hold any religious activities in public (including Christian weddings, funerals, baptisms – which therefore have to be carried out in utmost secrecy). The Constitution states in Article 36 (c): “Education shall strive to inculcate obedience to Islam, love for Islam...”. Children of converts are forced to study Islamic teachings, while children of expatriate Christians are exempt from attending Islamic classes. The Maldivian Democracy Network, a local human rights group, stated in a 2015 report that Islamic textbooks used in schools cultivate anti-Semitism and xenophobia, and glorify *jihad* or war against those who allegedly “obstruct” Islam. Converts often decide not to share their new-won faith with their children out of fear that these may inadvertently tell others. Once converts are discovered, they can be put under pressure to divorce (if married) and lose both custody of their children and inheritance rights, and are likely to be isolated from their families.

#### **Community sphere:**

Social control in the Maldives is extremely strong as the population density is one of the highest in the world, especially in the capital Malé. Expatriate Christians are not permitted to openly practice their faith and expatriate Christians with a Muslim background have virtually no place of privacy. On the contrary, colleagues at work apply constant pressure to make them convert to Islam, trying to prove to migrant workers that Jesus is not the Savior and even using

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://www.miadhu.mv/article/en/6233>, last accessed 7 December 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://www.miadhu.mv/article/en/6669>, last accessed 7 December 2017.

money or promises of promotion at times. Converts try to blend in with the majority of people around them in their efforts to hide their faith. This includes clothing as well as attendance at the local mosque. Any native believer who is caught not attending will be questioned. Expatriate Christians enjoy more freedom, but there are times when they too are required to blend in, for example during Ramadan, by not drinking and eating in public.

**National sphere:**

The Constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The Constitution designates Sunni Islam as the official state religion, referring to the country as “100 percent” Muslim, and government regulations are based on Islamic law. The Maldives take no little pride in this. Among other regulations, one states: “It is illegal to propagate any other religion than Islam.” Penalties for violating this regulation range from house-arrest to imprisonment of up to five years, depending on the gravity of the offense. If the offenders are foreigners, they will usually be deported. Any opinions that seem contrary to Islam (even voices of Islamic moderation) are subject to harsh criticism and even violence. Especially with a “Defamation Law” in place, which includes clauses against anti-Islamic comments, Christians’ freedom of speech is restricted even more than before. Violations can result in six months in prison.

In 2017, the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC) issued a report into a complaint filed over a comment President Yameen made on 1 May 2016, in which the president stated: “We are not Allah’s second sons. We are humans, like in any other country.” The complaint alleged Yameen’s words were un-Islamic, since in Islam, it is blasphemous to claim God had children. Interestingly, the MBC said the Islamic ministry had explained that the remark was a [rebuttal to Jews and Christians](#),<sup>20</sup> who believe God had fathered children and “who work to hinder the progress and development of the Maldives”. Therefore, it did not violate broadcasting standards, the commission said.

**Church sphere:**

It is illegal for Maldivians to become Christians, let alone to gather as a church. The expatriate community enjoys more religious freedom as long as they practice their faith privately. There have been incidents where public gatherings of Christians were raided. Expatriate fellowships are under surveillance out of fear that they could be evangelizing local Maldivians. The government banned Christmas celebrations<sup>21</sup> in guesthouses on inhabited islands in December 2015, claiming that the practice is contrary to Islam and Maldivian culture. The Local Government Authority (LGA) – chaired by Home Minister Umar Naseer – sent a letter to the presidents of island and atoll councils (as well as to the mayors of Malé and Addu cities) asking them to inform guesthouse owners not to conduct any celebratory activities for tourists at Christmas. The letter noted that the current period is the peak season for the tourist industry and that it had come to the LGA’s attention that “tourists are carrying out activities to celebrate Christmas in the Maldives.” Non-Islamic material is considered contraband and by law has to be declared at customs upon entering the country. Accordingly, Christian material

<sup>20</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/yameens-remarks-on-sex-workers-opium-spark-controversy-124490>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/business/maldives-bans-christmas-celebrations-at-guesthouses-120958>, last accessed 20 December 2016.

cannot be imported or even produced in the country. Training Christian leaders is out of the question and Christian communities are not allowed to receive foreign Christian workers for ministry work.

#### **Violence:**

Due to security considerations, no details can be given. However, incidents of confiscating a Bible upon arrival as well as the detention and deportation of Christians took place in the WWL 2018 reporting period.

## Gender profile of persecution

**Female/Male:** No data available

## Future outlook

The Maldives is becoming a land in turmoil. Civil liberties are increasingly restricted, including media and social media, as the shocking [killing](#)<sup>22</sup> of well-known blogger Yameen Rasheed in April 2017 in the capital Malé showed. Given that the government's goal of protecting Islam remains unchanged and is even persistently re-emphasized, it is plain that the situation for religious minorities, especially Christians, is becoming increasingly difficult.

The island's younger generation feels increasingly "disenfranchised and excluded" and "disconnected from the fabric of society", as indicated by a [World Bank report](#)<sup>23</sup> released in October 2014. Rising globalization, internet use and economic expansion have "exposed young women and men to the outside world and new ideas and values, making them acutely aware of what they can aspire to", reads the report. "Yet, both female and male youth face the shackles of the limited island economy, lack empowerment and community engagement, and contend with rigid norms of behaviour and increasingly conservative values, as well as an inadequate education and training system that ill prepares them for the labor market." The report argues that these issues mean that many young Maldivians are being "denied passage into adulthood". These social issues translate into a growing radicalization, as seen in the numbers of Maldivians who join the fighting in Iraq and Syria. One observer even referred to the Maldives as "[a Paradise lost to terrorism](#)"<sup>24</sup>. This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives do have one of the highest per capita rates of terrorists fighting abroad. The government is well aware of these threats, but prefers to [heavily fine](#)<sup>25</sup> broadcasters who dare to publicize

<sup>22</sup> See: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?ref=todayspaper&utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=52f02e25af-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_04\\_24&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-52f02e25af-399904105&r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?ref=todayspaper&utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=52f02e25af-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_04_24&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-52f02e25af-399904105&r=0), 23 April 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/460551468263693729/pdf/939490WPOP15300th0Report0with0cover.pdf>, last accessed 20 December 2016.

<sup>24</sup> See: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-maldives-losing-a-tourist-paradise-to-terrorism/>, last accessed 1 December 2016.

<sup>25</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/cable-tv-provider-fined-half-a-million-for-airing-al-jazeera-corruption-expose-131202>, 17 June 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.



any such internal state details, as happened in June 2017. Additionally, the government is emphasizing its defense of being 100% Muslim as shown in a speech by the [defense minister](#)<sup>26</sup> and by the president, who said that the Maldives is target for [“ideological warfare”](#)<sup>27</sup> against Islam in November 2017.

There is one other big question the Maldives are facing, namely its relationship to Saudi Arabia. This is connected to the country’s growing Islamization since funding for major projects often come from the Saudi kingdom. In preparation for a visit by the Saudi king to the Maldives in March 2017, reports said that the government had plans to sell the Faafu atoll for a sum of US\$10 billion dollar so that Saudi Arabia could develop it into the equivalent of the French Riviera. However, the leaked information seems to have displeased the Saudi king, causing him to [postpone his trip](#)<sup>28</sup>. It remains to be seen if the relations to its big sponsors are in any way inhibited now. All this, together with the political fracas reported above in the section “Context”, shows that the persecution engines *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* are intertwined and very influential.

## Policy considerations

Taking into account the above persecution dynamics, Open Doors suggests the following policy recommendations:

- The government of Maldives should uphold the citizens’ right to change one’s religion.
- Article 9 (d) of the Constitution which states that a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives would mean converts would lose their citizenship, thus, the government should amend this provision.
- Countries that do business, especially pertaining to tourism, with the government of Maldives should discuss the issue of religious freedom with the country’s leaders, and integrate the Freedom of Religion or Belief standards in their business policy.
- The international community, with the guidance of the UN Special Rapporteur Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, should raise awareness of the situation of religious minorities in the Maldives and attacks against the Special Rapporteur should be strictly condemned by all political players in the country.
- The UN, through the Special Rapporteur Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, should call for the Maldives to repeal the Defamation law ratified in August 2016 in line with international Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- The international community should cooperate with the Maldives to develop a de-radicalization plan for Islamic fighters returning from the Middle East.

<sup>26</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/on-anniversary-of-1988-coup-maldives-threatened-by-secularism-and-extremism-133956>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

<sup>27</sup> See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/president-warns-of-ideological-warfare-malicious-economic-schemes-134144>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

<sup>28</sup> See: <http://www.dhivehisitee.com/executive/faafu-saudi-maldives-sale-4/>, 17 March 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

- Open Doors welcomes the Maldives’ pioneering role in the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, crucial for the prevention and stemming of extremism. The UN in Maldives and UN Security Council should address Freedom of Religion or Belief under the Resolution as a fundamental right for youth and cornerstone for peace and security.
- The UN in Maldives should report on and press the government to comply with Freedom of Religion or Belief as a signatory to and active supporter of the Sustainable Development Goals: Ensuring (10.2) social, economic and political inclusion for Christian minorities and (16.10) guarantees of the fundamental freedoms under international law.

## WWR in-depth reports

No in-depth reports on Maldives are currently available at:  
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Maldives available at:  
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

## World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/maldives/>

- Maldives to EU: ‘Islam shall be the basis of all laws’  
23 April 2018  
The Maldives government has told the European Union it will not consider amending its constitution to allow for religious freedom in the country.
- Maldives activist investigated for ‘blasphemy’ over ‘religions other than Islam’ tweet  
8 January 2018  
An activist in the Maldives has received death threats and is being investigated for “blasphemy” after posting a tweet in response to President Abdulla Yameen’s comment that his government would not allow any other religion in the country than Islam.

- [Maldives told to retract criticism of UN Special Rapporteur](#)  
25 July 2017  
The Maldives should retract its accusations against the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) – its former Foreign Minister, Ahmed Shaheed – and condemn the calls for his beheading, says the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).
- [Repression of Maldives Christians to intensify](#)  
17 February 2017  
The President of the Maldives has vowed to enact a national programme to “promote Islamic unity and foster religious and national spirit”.
- [Maldives removes church image from school textbook](#)  
20 January 2017  
The Maldives government has recalled a school textbook that contained illustrations of two churches, after protests from parents.

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## Recent country developments

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

- [Maldives: Apostasy will not be tolerated](#)  
3 May 2018  
The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has published a policy paper dealing (among other topics) with the question of apostates.
- [Maldives: Dictatorial paranoia in full swing](#)  
14 April 2018  
The state of emergency, recently extended by another 30 days, has been declared unconstitutional.
- [Maldives: President changes gear and heads for dictatorship](#)  
20 February 2018  
In a surprise move, the Maldivian Supreme Court has decided to drop all charges of terrorism made against several exiled or jailed members of the opposition.

- [Maldives: Political turmoil as Parliament meets under military protection](#)  
1 September 2017  
As the Maldives Independent reported on 14 August 2017, chaos is escalating as the government used police to prevent opposition parliamentarians from entering the building.
- [Maldives: Opposition wins in local elections](#)  
2 June 2017  
After the opposition won the local elections on 6 May 2017, President Yameen lashed out against opposition leaders.
- [Maldives: Huge investments indicate ever closer ties with Saudi Arabia](#)  
3 April 2017  
During preparations for a visit by Saudi Arabia’s King Salman to the Maldives, expected forthcoming deals are being discussed in the media.
- [Maldives: President promises program to promote Islamic unity](#)  
25 February 2017  
President Yameen put a strong emphasis on the country’s economy, but also elaborated on religion in his fourth state-of-the-nation address. He announced a program to “promote Islamic unity and foster religious and national spirit” among the public.
- [Maldives: Growing Islamic conservatism](#)  
26 January 2017  
A local news website accused a school which introduced an unauthorized textbook with a page illustrating two churches of being “a gateway for turning Maldivians [in]to Christians”.
- [Maldives: Commonwealth exit marks end of divisions](#)  
28 November 2016  
The Maldives parliament has endorsed President Yameen’s executive decision to leave the Commonwealth over alleged unfair treatment, interference in domestic affairs, and threats to sovereignty and independence.

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