



MAURITANIA: Country Dossier

July 2018



OpenDoors

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 Countries¹

		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

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

MAURITANIA – Country Dossier (July 2018)

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Introduction

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

MAURITANIA		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	57	47
WWL 2017	55	
WWL 2016	-	
WWL 2015	50	
WWL 2014	51	

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

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

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

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding MAURITANIA

Link for general background information:

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

Recent country history

Mauritania became a French protectorate in 1904 and gained independence in 1960. Until 1979, Mauritania has 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 interruption 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 Abdel Aziz came to power in a military coup in 2008. The country is formally a multi-party democracy, but its parliament is completely dominated by the ruling Islamist party.

The religious landscape

Mauritania is completely dominated by Islam. The influence and prominence of more austere and intolerant versions of Islam has become increasingly visible in Mauritania. 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.

The political landscape

The Mauritanian state has not been able to maintain a presence throughout the country or enforce rule of law. Public administration is very poorly qualified, and clientelism and nepotism are major issues. Decisions about public affairs are generally made through these clientelist networks. Informal institutions such as family, tribal or personal connections are dominant. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (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 United States 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. 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 socio-economic landscape

Mauritania is one of the world's poorest countries despite being rich with various mineral resources including oil and iron ore. One third of Mauritanian children are malnourished, and when there is enough food, it is often too expensive for the poor to afford. Only 4% of the land is arable, and there is little internal food security. 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. The continued existence of the practice of slavery is also 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 i) of Arab descent (Moors) and Berbers, and ii) of black African descent and the descendants of the former slaves of the Moors who are also called Haratine.

Concluding remarks

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.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
4,266,000	10,000	0.2

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

During the 1st century AD North Africa was heavily colonized by Rome. Amongst people subdued by Roman authority in the region (Aegyptus, Cyrenaica, Africa, Numidia, and Mauritania) Christianity quickly became a religion of protest—it was a reason for them to ignore the requirement to honor the Roman Emperor through sacrificial ceremonies. For many, it was a direct statement against Roman rule.⁴ With the arrival of Islam in Mauritania a process of Arabization and Islamization began which seems to have extinguished any Christian

⁴ Boddy-Evans, A., Early Christianity in North Africa, available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/early-christianity-in-north-africa-part-1-44461>, last accessed 20 July 2017.

presence. The recent history of Christianity in Mauritania can be said to have begun again when the territory became part of French West Africa in 1904, but French colonial interest and control was mostly limited to the coast and the Saharan trade routes.

Following independence from France in 1960, life for the few Christians in the country became very tough but the Roman Catholic Church at least has continued to serve expatriates from Senegal, France, and the Canary Islands. There is a Catholic diocese in Nouakchott which is the capital and largest city of Mauritania. According to some sources, the diocese “was founded on the 18th December 1965, five years after the end of the French protectorate rule and the proclamation of independence.”⁵ The same source also quotes the bishop of Nouakchott as saying: “We want to represent the human face of Christ in a context where Christians are a tiny minority. It is difficult to quantify the number of Catholics in Mauritania. Besides Europeans, the majority of Catholics is made up of migrant workers from neighboring countries – mainly from Guinea Bissau. Proselytism is forbidden in Mauritania. Muslims are banned from converting to other religions. The Catholic Church is not allowed to open Catholic schools, but only kindergartens, which are also attended by the children of Muslim parents who often regret not being allowed to continue to send their children to a Catholic school.”⁶ Research indicates that there is no well-established Protestant church in the country.⁷

What church networks exist today? ⁸

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	5,100	2,300	2,200	320	-	1,300	2,600

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to the World Christian Database (WCD), the majority of Christians in Mauritania are Roman Catholic. There are a few hundred indigenous Christians with a Muslim background and they usually congregate in underground churches.

⁵ See: <http://www.southworld.net/the-catholic-church-in-mauritania/>, last accessed 17 November 2017.

⁶ See <http://www.southworld.net/the-catholic-church-in-mauritania/>.

⁷ See Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, p. 282.

⁸ **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.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ⁹
10,000	4,231,000	-	-	20,300	-	420	4,760

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD statistics, 99.2% of Mauritians are Muslim 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.

Notes on the current situation

Christians in Mauritania face various challenges:

- The growth of Islamic radicalization in the region is creating fear among Christians in the country.
- The country's law places massive restrictions on the preaching of Christian faith.
- The country's law punishes a convert from Islam by death if that person does not recant the decision to convert within three days.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 57 / Position: 47

WWL 2017 Points: 55 / Position: 47

WWL 2016 Not in Top 50

Where persecution comes from

Mauritania's official designation is "The Islamic Republic of Mauritania" and its autocratic government often tries to garner legitimacy by projecting itself as a protector of the Islamic religion. Family and societal pressure is especially intense for Christians with a Muslim background. The influence of radical Islamic ideology is on the rise, including actions taken by the government to implement dormant Sharia laws. Therefore, the state is a major source of persecution. Radical Islamic preachers contribute greatly to the radicalization of society and fuel antagonism and hatred towards non-Muslims. Islamic militants are also active in the country. The existence of a caste system in the country that privileges certain groups and justifies the bondage and slavery of darker skinned Mauritians is also justified by invoking

⁹ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

Islam. Hence, those who are more privileged vigilantly oppose any other worldview that could disrupt the status quo, including Christianity.

How Christians are suffering

Indigenous Christians with a Muslim background - especially outside the capital - are vulnerable to the most intense forms of persecution. In addition to the pressure, ostracism and risk of violence they face from their family and the wider community, if their Christian faith is discovered they could also be charged with “apostasy” which carries the death penalty in Mauritania. Any expression of faith by non-Mauritanian Christians (e.g. migrants from sub-Saharan Africa or aid-workers) also carries the risk of being prosecuted under the laws of the country that criminalize proselytization of Muslims. In addition to the risk of prosecution by the authorities, Christians in Mauritania also face the risk of violence by militant groups such as al-Qaida in the Maghreb. Collective acts of worship are particularly difficult due to the restrictive environment which makes it impossible for Christians (especially for congregations of converts from Islam) to openly meet and conduct services.

Examples

- 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.
- While the Catholic Church is allowed to renovate the interior of churches, renovation of the exterior for the Catholic Church and the construction of churches belonging to other denominations is prohibited.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 57 / Position: 47

WWL 2017 Points: 55 / Position: 47

WWL 2016 Not in Top 50

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Mauritania went up from a score of 55 points in WWL 2017 to a score of 57 points in WWL 2018. The rise is mainly due to an increase in pressure on Christians in all *Spheres of life*. Mauritania's score for violence went down to zero (it was already very low in WWL 2017), however this may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Mauritania ¹⁰	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	Very strong

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 fundamentalist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

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 it can also be shaming for the tribal/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 and the campaign against slavery has triggered a hostile reaction from Islamists in the country.

¹⁰ 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.

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

In Mauritania there are several drivers of persecution. The state and government officials are among the principal drivers since the state embraces Islam as its ideology. In addition to the state, radical imams and Islamic teachers also play a crucial role by fueling prejudice and hatred against Christians. Ordinary citizens influenced by the teachings of such imams can also be considered to be drivers of persecution. In the context of slavery and the prevalence of a caste system in Mauritania, the current situation is reinforced by and fused with religion; the views of radical Islamic preachers is also supported by tribal leaders. Hence, conservative tribal leaders intent on preserving ethnic hierarchy and social order are also drivers of persecution in Mauritania.

Context

Mauritania has been under military rule for more than 30 years, with only a short democratic interruption 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 and the armed forces are the country's dominant political institution. The country is formally a multiparty democracy, but its parliament is completely dominated by the ruling party. There are several Islamist groups that are active in the political scene in the country and Islamism is the dominant political ideology. Ethnicity is also an important factor in Mauritania's politics since ethnic African groups in the southern parts of the country feel aggrieved by their marginalization by northern Arab-Berber ethnic groups.

Mauritania is one of the world's poorest countries. One third of the children are malnourished, and when there is enough food available, it is often too expensive for many to afford. Only 4% of the land is arable, and there is little internal food security. While the government's

compliance with World Bank economic liberalization measures has resulted in some economic growth, this growth has not meant an improvement in the living conditions of most Mauritians. In this vast and arid country with a largely nomadic population, the state has not been able to have a presence throughout the country and informal institutions such as family, tribal or personal connections seem to be more influential than the state. This is evidenced by the persistence prevalence of slavery in the country despite the efforts of the government to eradicate the practice.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has been a challenge to the Mauritanian government since 2005 but the army has had some success in combatting it. There is a real threat that Mauritania will become radicalized as sympathy for radical Islam is rising. 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. Although the Arab Spring movement did not have the same impact it had in many other countries in the region, in 2016 there were some unprecedented protests organized by the Islamist party whose goal was to stop the collaboration between Mauritanian and French forces in their fight against AQIM. There were also protests over socio-economic problems, such as the excessive cost of living, and discrimination against ethnic African minorities, on top of the political instability and severe tensions which have existed for several years.

Apart from the Christian minority, there is also a very small but growing Shia religious minority in Mauritania. While the government has good ties with Iran and does not target this community, Sunni religious leaders denounce this minority group and call for restrictive measures to be taken against the Shia Muslims.

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.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

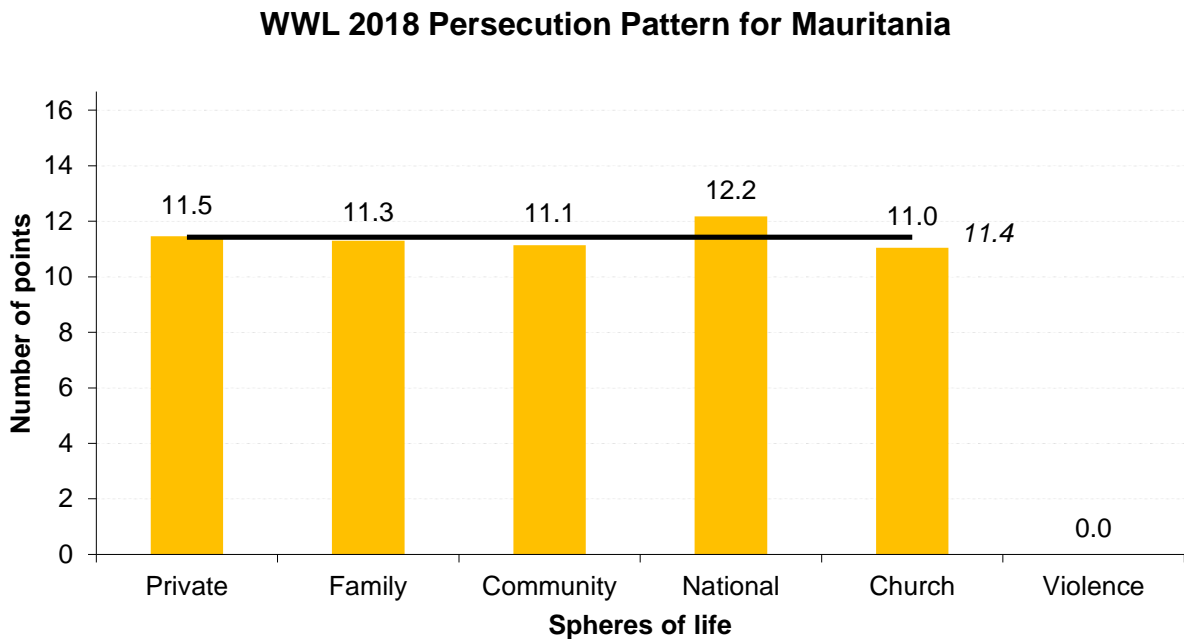
Christian converts from a Muslim background are most exposed to persecution and face an enormous amount of pressure from their immediate and extended family. In this nomadic society where communal interdependence and the extended family are necessary for one's survival, converts face a huge challenge 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.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Mauritania shows:

- Pressure has increased in all *Spheres of life* compared to WWL 2017. The average pressure on Christians rose from 10.8 in WWL 2017 to 11.4.
- Pressure is strongest in the *National sphere*: The Mauritanian state is officially an Islamic Republic and is not very willing to recognize and accommodate the presence of Christians, let alone converts from Islam to Christianity. The autocratic nature of the regime and its overall poor human rights record also reinforces this hostility towards Christians.
- The score for violence went down from 0.6 in WWL 2017 to zero. The lack of reports could be due to the difficulty in getting information from Christians with a Muslim background who are often isolated and who might well be suffering at the hands of family and community, if their faith has been discovered.

Private sphere:

There is relative freedom for private worship for non-Mauritanian Christians who have a Christian background. However, local 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. 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 symbolic up till now, it remains a big threat to those Christians having a Muslim background.

Family sphere:

Christian parents find it difficult to raise their children in accordance with their religious beliefs. This is a problem for both local converts and foreign Christians, especially those from other sub-Saharan African countries. Children of Christian parents have to attend Islamic classes at school and are likely to face discrimination and harassment from their peers. These harassments are also racially and ethnically tinged. 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. Expatriate Christians have relative freedom in this regard (as compared with local converts) since they can conduct marriages, baptisms and funerals with Christian rites.

Community sphere:

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 very 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 ethnic antagonism and prejudice.

National sphere:

Even though Mauritania 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”. 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:

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 loud. 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. All 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.

Violence:

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 has been extremely difficult to get any confirmed reports of such incidents within the WWL 2018 reporting period.

Gender profile of persecution

Female / Male:

No separate information available.

Future outlook

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. *Islamic oppression* is likely to continue as a major persecution engine in Mauritania. The turbulence and political instability that characterizes the country's history does not bode well. The poverty of the country as well as the *Ethnic antagonism* and the growing divisiveness 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, gives rise to concern about the future for Christians in Mauritania.

Policy considerations

- In accordance with international human rights treaties, the international community should investigate and monitor the attacks against immigrants, including Christians.
- The international community should actively monitor the position of Christians and religious minorities. The government of Mauritania and the African regional organizations should closely monitor developments in radical Islamic activity in the country.

WWR in-depth reports

In-depth reports are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

- [WEST AFRICA – Islam and Islamism in Francophone West Africa – re-issued – 2017](#)
September 2017 (based on 2012 unpublished report)
Using the Islamist occupation of Northern Mali as starting point, this 20 page report offers an overview of the current state of Islam in eight further French-speaking countries of West Africa: Mauritania, Senegal, Republic of Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast, Benin and Togo.

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Mauritania 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/mauritania/>

- [Mauritania: death penalty for blasphemy ‘even if they repent’](#)
21 November 2017
Mauritania announced on 17 November 2017 that showing repentance will no longer be a reason to repeal a death sentence handed out for blasphemy and apostasy.

Recent country developments

There are currently no recent items on Mauritania. Any new articles will be made available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Mauritania> (password: freedom).

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