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Maldives: Country Dossier

December 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

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

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

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

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

External Links - Introduction

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

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Maldives

Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Maldives: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
459,000	thousands	OD estimate

Maldives: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	77	15
WWL 2020	78	14
WWL 2019	78	14
WWL 2018	78	13
WWL 2017	76	13

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

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Maldives: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Organized crime cartels or networks, Violent religious groups
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Non-Christian religious leaders, Organized crime cartels or networks

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

The Maldives has one of the highest population densities worldwide, especially on its main island, Malé. The close-knit, homogeneous communities 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.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

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

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

- If their new faith is discovered, Christian converts are stripped of their citizenship, isolated from the society and punished with loss of state benefits for violating Sharia (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 26)
- Non-Muslims living in or visiting the country are prohibited from openly expressing their religious beliefs, especially with Maldivians (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- There are no churches in Maldives and any non-Muslim rite is prohibited (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christian expatriates' private worship meetings are strictly monitored and controlled by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian women are harassed or face violence if they do not abide by traditional Islamic dress code (ICCPR Art. 18 and CEDAW Art. 2)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

See above.

External Links - Short country profile

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Maldives

Link for general background information

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

Recent history

The over 1,000 islands making up the Maldives are a politically divided country. After the ousting of the first democratically elected president, [Mohamed Nasheed](#), in February 2012 (Washington Post, 12 April 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) had been driven out of the country or arrested. Some founded an exiled United Maldives Opposition in May 2016, headed by ex-President Nasheed who was granted asylum in the UK.

The leaders' intention to protect the country from becoming less than 100% Islam is the ideological key for understanding the Maldives. Although the surprise presidential victory of opposition politician Ibrahim Solih in September 2018 did not change this goal, it definitely changed the way the government communicates. But if the government sees the need to brush up on its Islamic credentials, they will not hesitate to do so, as the surprising and quick closing of the NGO Maldives Democratic Network in November 2019 showed.

This in turn is a good reminder that the small Christian minority needs to be very careful not to arouse any attention, which is also true for the larger group of Christian migrant workers, who mainly serve in the hospitality sector, which has hit very hard by the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore fair to say that Christians are struggling on many fronts at the moment.

Political and legal 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 political 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 which Maldivian politics is facing - the paranoia of its leaders, no matter who is ruling. Staying in power seems to be a high priority, for which all means are used. This was shown again in the presidential election campaign in 2018, which was fought as a battle against all forms of opposition - both real and perceived. The small Christian minority has virtually no room to breathe under such pressure.

The Maldives has been a land in turmoil in recent years (excluding the islands used as tourist resorts). Civil liberties are increasingly restricted, including media and social media, as shown by the [killing](#) of well-known blogger Yameen Rasheed in April 2017 in the capital Malé (New York Times, 23 April 2017), the closing of the NGO "Maldives Democratic Network" in November 2019 and the suspension of English-language news site "Maldives Independent" at the end of January 2020, although the latter was not due to government action. Given that the government's goal of protecting Islam remains unchanged, it is plain that the situation for religious minorities, especially Christians, remains difficult. This was illustrated by the seizure of more than 100 books with "[irreligious content](#)" from a book fair at the end of August 2019. These included Christian books (Maldives Independent, 3 September 2019).

So far, it does not seem that the new leader, Ibrahim Solih, who was elected with a huge margin in September 2018, is able to bring any substantial change to the Maldives. On 16 August 2018, Human Rights Watch [published a report](#) entitled "An all-out assault on democracy – Crushing dissent in the Maldives". It outlines recent developments in politics and human rights. The report serves to outline what uphill struggles Solih will have to face. The fact that the new government chose [two female judges](#) to serve at the Supreme Court in August 2019 is a sign that the country might be slowly changing (Maldives Independent, 26 August 2019), as is the clear statement by an [official investigation](#) into the murder of journalist Ahmed Rilwan in 2014, reporting that he had been killed by Islamic militants (Reuters, 2 September 2019).

It is unlikely that President Solih will be able or willing to bring extensive changes to the Maldives. However, he has given several small signals for a changing approach to serving the country. One such signal was given when he [joined the protest march](#) by the families of the two bloggers killed for their liberal views, in April 2019 (Maldives Independent, 24 April 2019). Apparently, voters appreciate this approach. His MDP party won the elections in April 2019 by a [two-thirds majority in parliament](#), with a voter turnout of 80% (Maldives Independent, 7 April 2019). Solih was quoted as saying: The fact that "our campaign was issue-oriented and not based on hatred and narrow divisions is a win for our young democracy. That our government did not hinder those candidates with whom we did not agree is a big win for the country". By this, he was referring to the [religiously charged rhetoric](#) of the leader of the opposition Jumhooree Party (JP), Gasim Ibrahim, who stirred up controversy by claiming that the MDP was planning to allow the building of temples and churches in the strictly Muslim country (Maldives Independent, 26 March 2019).

However, the [stabbing of three](#) foreign nationals in Malé in February 2020 (BBC News, 6 February 2020) and the [police raid on Maduvvari island](#) against a group of radical Muslims in December 2019 (AP, 20 December 2019) show that the Maldives is not just trying to keep the country 100% Islamic, but is also struggling with violent militancy. This in turn shows that the Christian minority has to be very cautious in what they do and cannot show in public any presence as a Christian community. Even though the new political leadership of the country shows less *Dictatorial paranoia* than the one before, there is little doubt it would jump into action should Christians be perceived as a threat or even a blemish to the nation.

Religious landscape

The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians is "thousands". For security reasons, no WCD breakdown of religions can be published. The country is officially 100% Sunni Muslim and each Maldivian citizen wanting to turn away from Islam will lose his or her citizenship. Among the many expatriate workers, there are Christians (as well as Hindus), but if they dare to meet at all, they have to be very cautious and inconspicuous.

The language of the Maldives is Dhivehi: The complete Bible in this language is not yet available.

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 cooling of relations with Saudi Arabia in 2017 when the government announced a massive Saudi investment in Maldives prematurely, thus angering the Saudi king. The investment never came to pass, but influences from Wahhabism and also Salafism have poured into the country nevertheless, not least through the internet.

COVID-19 changed the religious landscape at least temporarily insofar as many Christians working in the hospitality sector have lost their jobs and returned to their home countries, predominantly in other South Asian countries.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards) and [Word Factbook](#) (March 2020):

- The most important economic sectors are tourism and agriculture (mainly fishing and coconuts), sand mining has become another business.
- The dependency on tourism can be seen in the fact that 69.5% of the workforce are employed in the services sector, responsible for 81% of the country's GDP.
- 8.2% of the population live below the national poverty line, people in multidimensional poverty count for 0.8%, people vulnerable to it for 4.8%.
As around 80% of the country is one meter or less below sea level, the Maldives is concerned about the effects of global warming.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#) overview/data:

- The Maldives' GDP reached 11.890 USD in 2018, compared with 200 USD in 1978.
- 2019 saw a record arrival of tourists with 1.7 million, but tourism came to an effective halt with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020; real GDP is expected to contract by 8.5% in 2020.
- The poverty headcount ratio at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP) was at 6.6% in 2016.

The immigration office [announced](#) in January 2019 that out of an estimated 144,000 migrant workers, approximately 63,000 were illegal residents, most of them employed in the tourist sector (Maldives Independent, 17 January 2019). In June 2019, the Economic Development Minister, Fayyaz Ismail, even revealed that the real number of labor migrants, legal and illegal, [stands at 250.000](#), and more would be needed (Sun, 30 June 2019). In relation to the number of

inhabitants of the Maldives, an estimated 459,000 people in 2020, this is a surprisingly high number. 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. Corruption poses another challenge the economy of the Maldives is facing, in the [Corruption Perception Index](#), the Maldives is ranked 130th of 180 countries.

The [return of Islamic militants](#) from abroad, especially Syria, who are often regarded as heroes in Maldivian society, may endanger the tourist business (Maldives Independent, 17 December 2019). In normal times, the news in February 2020 that a stabbing attack had wounded three foreign nationals and that in April 2020 the Islamic State group (IS) claimed its [first attack](#) on the Maldives by burning five government-owned boats would have been highly worrying for the country's economy (Long War Journal, 16 April 2020). However, with the COVID-19 crisis times are far from normal. The complete tourist sector came to a halt and did not re-start until 15 July 2020, hitting the islands arguably harder than the attacks by militants (mentioned above) ever could have. According to CCN Travel (16 July 2020), tourism accounts altogether for [two thirds](#) of the Maldives' GDP.

Christians (many of whom work in the hospitality sector) are also suffering from the economic blow caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recovery will take a long time and people will face a lot of insecurity and changes, so religious minorities like Christians may be easily used as scapegoats for all kinds of woes, including unemployment. This means they need to be even more cautious than before COVID-19 struck.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and [World Factbook](#) (March 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The Maldives shows a mixture of Sinhalese, Dravidian, Arab, Australasian, and African descent, ethnicities play no major role in the country.
- **Main languages:** Dhivehi is the main language, a dialect related to Sinhala, but the script is derived from Arabic. Most government officials speak English as well.
- **Urban population:** 39.8% with most of it concentrated in the capital Malé, which is one of the most densely populated cities in the world.
- **Schooling/Literacy:** The mean years of schooling are 6.8; the teacher-pupil ratio is 1:10; the literacy rate (age 15 and higher) is 98.6%.
- **Health:** There are 10.4 physicians and 43 hospital beds available per 10,000 people.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#) overview/data:

- **Population/age:** 20% of the population are under 14, 3.6% are above 65.
- **Education:** The school enrolment rate stands at 97.1%, in 2017, 1927 children were out of school.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 6.1%, an estimated 23.5% of youth were neither in school, employment nor training. An estimated 19% of all male youth between 15 and 24 are unemployed. All these numbers are national estimates and relate to the last available data in 2016.

- **IDPs/Refugees:** There is only a very small number of IDP/Refugees in the country, but the number of legal migrant workers is around 26%.
- In its country categorization, the World Bank rated Maldives as being an [upper-middle income country](#).
- More than 30% of the population live in the capital Malé.

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

- **Human Development Index:** With a score of 0.719, the Maldives rank 104th out of 189 countries, bringing the country into the "high human development" section. While the general trend in development is positive, it has slowed down in recent years.
- **Life expectancy:** 78.6 years
- **Median age:** 29.9 years
- **Gender inequality:** In the Gender Inequality Index, the Maldives score 0.367 and rank 81.

Maldivian society is Islamic and - according to UNDP figures - very young, with a median age of 29.9 years. The Maldives are 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%. More recent reports are not available but the problem is officially recognized. The Ministry for Family and Children, for instance, [reported](#) higher child abuse numbers in November 2017 and the mayor of the capital Malé decried the increasing crime in his city (Maldives Independent, 16 November 2017).

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. Given the small size of the country and with many islands basically being micro-societies in themselves, the number of youth out of school and employment is worryingly high. A good example for these microcosms has been the situation on [Maduvvari island](#), where a group of radical Muslims was able to deprive women and children of health care and conduct child marriages, going against national laws (Associated Press, 20 December 2019).

The small number of Christians suffer from a lack of options for enjoying fellowship and worship together, which results in isolation, social problems and illnesses which they share with the majority of the population. The COVID-19 crisis has not only had an economic effect, it has also put immense pressure on the health system. As a result, medical help has been sought from neighboring and befriended countries.

Technological landscape

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

- **Internet usage:** 68.4% penetration rate - survey date: June 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 59.1% of the population – survey date: December 2018

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

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 166.4 per 100 people

The Maldives are challenged by their geographical situation, consisting of atolls spread over a wide area in the Indian Ocean. It should also be kept in mind that there is a wide gap between resort islands for tourists (with unhindered internet access and all the technological niceties of global life) and residential islands where the Maldivians live. Therefore, all such statistics should be viewed with caution.

The Maldives was not assessed in [Freedom House's Freedom on the Net Report](#) 2020. However, as the number of internet users increases, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources. As long as government intervention remains low, this is likely to strengthen isolated members of the Christian community.

Security situation

A country observer once referred to the Maldives as [“a Paradise lost to terrorism”](#) (Jamestown, 22 January 2016). This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives do have one of the highest per capita rates of Islamic militants fighting abroad, a Maldives Independent report from December 2019 speaks of [1400 militants](#) in action. The challenge will be to re-integrate them when they return from fighting in Syria. Connected with this, [two additional challenges](#) arise (Jamestown, 25 March 2019): One is that it is completely unclear what to expect from widows and children of ‘shahids’ (Islamic militants killed in Iraq and Syria) returning to the Maldives. The authorities do not know how to deal with them, although they are cracking down on violent militants. The other challenge is that Islamic militants who have returned have been acquitted in court due to lack of proof that they were actually involved in fighting after 2015, the time when a law penalizing fighting in a foreign war came into force. Those men are free and are regarded by many Maldivians as being true Islamic heroes.

In September 2019, the government placed [17 organizations](#) on a list under the Anti-Terrorism Act. So far, Christians have not been a particular target for radical Muslims, but this is more due to them keeping a low profile than for not being considered a target worthy of attack. Should Christians become more visible or should Maldivians be exposed or just accused of being Christian, this may quickly change.

Trends analysis

1) Lifting self-inflicted isolation, but not changing ideology

The new government started with encouraging signs, the first even directly after the election, when in a unanimous vote in November 2018, the new parliament of the Maldives decided to [rejoin the Commonwealth](#) of Nations (Maldives Independent, 5 December 2018). This is one of the strongest visible signs of a reduction in the influence of the Persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia* so far. However, neither the legal nor the societal situation has changed, so that neither expatriate nor the very few local Christians can expect any relief in the short term, although new restrictions on hate-speech give some relief to anyone seen as being different or even deviating (see under *Islamic oppression* below). The seizure of Christian books from a book-fair in August 2019 and the revocation of the Maldivian Democratic Network's [legal existence](#) (despite its apologies for 'insensitive language') cast serious doubts on that (Maldives Independent, 12 October 2019). As far as the "protection of Islam" is concerned, it is fair to say that the new government will play the same old tunes all over again. Consequently, a member of MDN warned in an interview in June 2020 that to claim that one is a ["liberal" politician](#) does not mean that one has leanings towards human rights or towards countering radical Islamic views (The Diplomat, 27 June 2020). The Maldives will stay 100% Islamic and this means that Christian activities will need to remain under the radar.

2) Countering radical Islam in the midst of a dire economic situation

The year 2020 has seen two Islamist attacks in the Maldives, one directed against tourists, the other against the [government](#) and claimed by IS (Long War Journal, 16 April 2020). This would be worrying enough, especially given the number of veteran fighters pouring back into the Maldives. If the number of 1400 militants referred to under "Security Situation" is correct, it may turn out to be too many for the country's authorities to handle on their own, given the nation's small size. This is even more true now that the COVID-19 pandemic struck another harsh blow to society, especially its economic aspects. Instead of welcoming an expected two million visitors in 2020, the Maldives had to cope with a decline in numbers of around 70%-75%. Consequently, the Maldives have looked for international help; support has become something of a competition between India and China. Whether the Maldives really [returns to the Indian fold](#), remains to be seen, it is very well possible that the country will try to balance different interests (The Diplomat, 19 August 2020).

If the economy takes a long time to recover, many in the population - especially the youth - will start looking around for other perspectives and radical Islam could become an attractive option. But even if this was not the case, the prospect of facing a wave of homebound radical Muslims is worrying enough for a small religious minority like Christians.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Maldives country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12651486>
- Recent history: Mohamed Nasheed - http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/mohamed-nasheed-talks-about-the-island-president-keeping-fragile-democracy-afloat/2012/04/12/gIQAUzvCFT_story.html
- Political and legal landscape: killing - <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
- Political and legal landscape: "irreligious content" - <https://maldivesindependent.com/society/customs-seizes-more-than-100-books-with-irreligious-content-147706>
 - Political and legal landscape: published a report - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/16/maldives-opposition-media-under-attack>
 - Political and legal landscape: two female judges - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/adhaalath-party-urges-respect-for-differing-views-on-religious-disputes-147535>
 - Political and legal landscape: official investigation - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-maldives-rights-journalist/commission-says-maldives-journalist-was-murdered-by-islamist-militants-idUSKCN1VN0EA>
 - Political and legal landscape: joined the protest march - <https://maldivesindependent.com/feature-comment/dont-let-go-president-marches-with-family-of-murdered-blogger-144983>
 - Political and legal landscape: two-thirds majority in parliament - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/elections-commission-set-to-announce-results-144781>
 - Political and legal landscape: religiously charged rhetoric - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/religious-rhetoric-incites-violence-presidential-commission-warns-144591>
 - Political and legal landscape: stabbing of three - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51399357>
 - Political and legal landscape: police raid on Maduvvari island - https://apnews.com/29ee51514b40dac943baf8265282d55d?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=dc0776231e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_12_20_02_49&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-dc0776231e-399904105
 - Economic landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
 - Economic landscape: Word Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/MV-summary.pdf>
 - Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/maldives>
 - Economic landscape: announced - <https://maldivesindependent.com/society/number-of-illegal-migrants-estimated-at-63000-143502>
 - Economic landscape: stands at 250.000 - <https://en.sun.mv/54227>
 - Economic landscape: Corruption Perception Index - <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/table>
 - Economic landscape: return of Islamic militants - <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/about-1400-extremists-willing-to-kill-in-maldives-149692>
 - Economic landscape: first attack - https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/04/islamic-state-claims-first-attack-in-island-nation-of-maldives.php?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+LongWarJournalSiteWide+%28FDD%27s+Long+War+Journal+Update%29
 - Economic landscape: two thirds - <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/maldives-reopens-tourism/index.html>
 - Social and cultural landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
 - Social and cultural landscape: Word Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/MV-summary.pdf>
 - Social and cultural landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/maldives>
 - Social and cultural landscape: upper-middle income country - <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>
 - Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MDV>
 - Social and cultural landscape: reported - <http://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/rise-in-child-abuse-reports-134234>
 - Social and cultural landscape: Maduvvari island - https://apnews.com/29ee51514b40dac943baf8265282d55d?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=dc0776231e

EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_12_20_02_49&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-dc0776231e-399904105

- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#mv>
- Technological landscape: World Bank's Country profile - https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=MDV
- Technological landscape: Freedom House's Freedom on the Net Report - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow>
- Security situation: "a Paradise lost to terrorism" - [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=45009&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=26∓cHash=58349b6fb2aac945e6e3fc34f8bff85d](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=45009&tx_ttnews[backPid]=26∓cHash=58349b6fb2aac945e6e3fc34f8bff85d)
- Security situation: 1400 militants - <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/about-1400-extremists-willing-to-kill-in-maldives-149692>
- Security situation: two additional challenges - https://jamestown.org/program/the-maldives-faces-dual-challenge-of-terrorist-returnees-and-extremist-hate-campaigns/?mc_cid=217d9039a5&mc_eid=b8f233d4ea
- Security situation: 17 organizations - <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-18-No-23#assessment2>
- Trends analysis: rejoin the Commonwealth - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-parliament-endorses-decision-to-rejoin-commonwealth-143069>
- Trends analysis: legal existence - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-suspends-ngo-for-slandering-islam-148485>
- Trends analysis: "liberal" politician - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/06/the-dangers-of-dog-whistling-to-extremists-in-the-maldives/>
- Trends analysis: government - https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/04/islamic-state-claims-first-attack-in-island-nation-of-maldives.php?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+LongWarJournalSiteWide+%28FDD%27s+Long+War+Journal+Update%29
- Trends analysis: returns to the Indian fold - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/08/has-india-won-the-match-over-maldives/>

WWL 2021: Church information / Maldives

Christian origins

This is officially a 100% Sunni Muslim country. In the interest of security no information about the Christian presence and its origins can be published in this section.

Church spectrum today

Due to security issues, no WCD breakdown can be published.

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Maldives

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Maldives: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	77	15
WWL 2020	78	14
WWL 2019	78	14
WWL 2018	78	13
WWL 2017	76	13

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

In WWL 2021, the level of pressure on Christians remained at a very high score, decreasing only slightly. The already very low violence score also went down. Converts have literally no space at all to live out their Christian faith and expatriate Christians (often migrant workers) lack possibilities for worshipping together without fearing arrest and deportation. Consequently, the Maldives is one of the few countries where the *Church sphere* continues to receive almost maximum points. The new government, which took over in mid-November 2018 has made no tangible improvements as regards freedom of religion. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Christian expatriates have returned to their home countries.

Persecution engines

Maldives: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all

Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

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

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The Islamic government still sees itself as the protector of Islam and watches over a set of laws that 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. Under the old government, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs had published a policy paper in April 2018 dealing (among other topics) with the question of [apostates](#) (Maldives Independent, 11 April 2018), stating that apostasy can never be tolerated. Around the same time, the Minister of Defense stated in all due clarity that he will [never allow freedom of religion](#) in the Maldives since it is a "country with moderate Islamic values" (Maldives Independent, 15 April 2018). The new government set a clear sign by making the [police meet](#) with people responsible for branding others "apostate" in social media blogs and advised them not to repeat such statements (Maldives Independent, 14 January 2019). However, there has been no change in attitude and the government struggles with accusations by the opposition and parts of society that it is [secular](#) (Miadhu, 8 October 2019).

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

While campaigning for re-election in 2018, then-President Yameen claimed that international pressure and opposition forces were attempting to make the Maldives less than [100% Islamic](#) (Maldives Independent, 3 July 2018). His defeat and arrest on corruption charges makes his political comeback unlikely. While it seems that President Solih has a different approach and may even have a genuine wish to implement more democracy and freedoms - thus indicating that *Dictatorial paranoia* is on the decline - this is not true for all freedoms. Freedom of religion continues to be restricted since "protection of religion" is purely understood to mean the protection of Islam. The protection against destroying "religious 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 freedom. A country expert summed it up as follows: "Perhaps nasty political partisanship is not the same as *Dictatorial paranoia*, but sometimes it smells similar."

Organized corruption and crime (Weak):

Corruption has been rampant 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 at whim and government officials are known to hire street-gang youth 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 have been steered by government leaders (at all levels), and especially target anyone who speaks out against the government or against strict Islam. The current government is not completely free from this, but tries to investigate and prosecute such crimes, as witnessed by the [sentence](#) former Vice-president Ahmed Adeb received in 2020 (The Diplomat, 7 October 2020). In a rare [disclosure](#), a presidential commission investigating the chain of abductions, murders and intimidation of liberal bloggers and intellectuals, stated in March 2019 that the “attacks were masterminded by one group and were motivated by religious, militant elements, with gang involvement” (Maldives Independent, 21 March 2019). While the full report is still awaiting publication, the commission’s chairman, Husnu Suood, stated in an interview that there was ‘[gang involvement](#)’ (Commission for the Protection of Journalists, 18 March 2019). It is common knowledge that certain gangs are in alliance with politicians, parties and security forces and are used for the violent intimidation of dissidents, but the gangs seem to be laying low for the time being. Radical Islamic groups that want to ferret out Christians and atheists also have connections and influence with gangs and corrupt police networks. Some criminals (individual or in a gang) act for their own benefit, but without specific intent to promote anarchy.

Drivers of persecution

Maldives: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	-	-	-	MEDIUM	WEAK
Government officials	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Maldives:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	-	-	-	MEDIUM	WEAK
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** The government of the Maldives insists that the country has to be run according to conservative Islamic tenets and that all citizens have to be Muslim ("100% Islam"). This is a fundamental issue which the new government is not going to try to change. There have even been calls to remove "secularists" from the government. Therefore religious freedom does not exist, except in a very limited way for expatriate Christians who are so strictly monitored and intimidated that they hardly dare to meet even behind closed doors.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Radical Islamic preachers and clerics, whether homegrown or coming from the Middle East, exert strong socio-religious control over their followers and are also 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. They have been instrumental in calling for the [shutdown](#) of the NGO, Maldavian Democracy Network (Amnesty International, 5 November 2019).
- **Extended family and normal citizens (Very strong):** Family and community are drivers of persecution for converts as well, if they are discovered. The closely-knit society and the fact that Malé is one of the cities in the world with the highest density of population makes these drivers strongly felt, just as the fact that less populated atolls are places which are not easy to leave and hence, social control is high as well.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Political parties like the already mentioned Jumhoree Party try to gain political support by making allegations about the 'threat of Christianization' and the dangers other religions will bring to the Maldives.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** It is not clear if jihadists returning from fighting with Islamic State group affiliates abroad have already become organized and formed groups, but their presence is a growing threat, reflected in the terrorist attacks in the WWL 2021 reporting period (although not targeted against Christians).

- **Organized crime cartels (Medium):** Whereas most gangs are not particularly interested in religious questions and are far more focused on making money and being able to exert power through brute force, some are motivated by religion, too.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Politics in the Maldives has a history of being dominated by strongmen, who have clung to power by all means. The newly elected president did not break with this tradition so far. Civil servants and authorities stick to what they know and the opposition uses every option to call the new government "un-Islamic" and a threat to the very identity of the country, even though it is seriously weakened. Therefore, all the ingredients for more *Dictatorial paranoia* are in place - at the expense of minorities and anyone seen as deviating from the norm.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Islamic leaders may not necessarily be interested in one political party or in one particular politician staying in power, but they are definitely interested in preserving the status quo. If this means supporting the authoritarian measures of a leader or party, they will do it.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Leaders of political parties in the Maldives have a long history of clinging desperately to power. It remains to be seen if President Solih and the MDP follows in this tradition. Due to their current levels of strength, there has so far been no need.
- **Organized crime cartels (Medium):** As already stated above, in order to protect their illicit activities, gangs will support the power-brokers they need. The Maldives has a long history of ties between gangs, politics and religion.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **Government officials and political parties (Medium):** Officials from the old (i.e. pre-November 2018) government and various political parties allegedly made use of gangs as they saw the need for it and all sides benefitted from this connection.
- **Organized crime cartels (Medium):** Radical Muslims have been known to link up with gangs and use them to ferret out Christians and atheists or anyone suspected of non-Muslim activity. Gangs can skillfully adapt their operations and are currently lying low.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Persecution takes place outside of those islands reserved for international tourists.

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 meet (e.g. in embassies) 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.

Converts to Christianity:

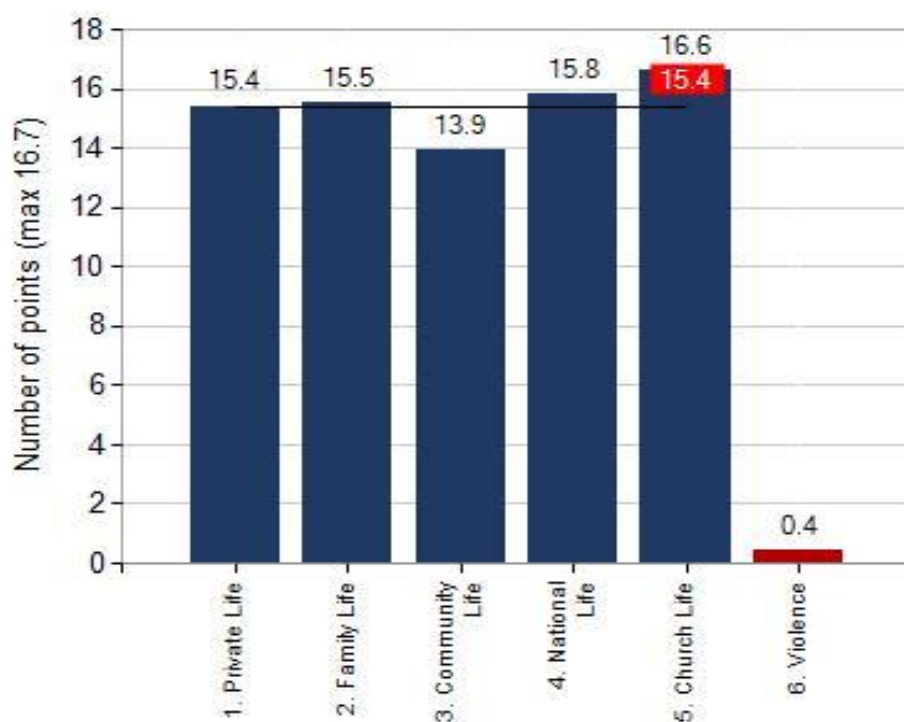
Christians with a Muslim background face by far the highest persecution as - officially - they do not exist in the country. It is understood that every Maldivian must be Muslim and anyone leaving Islam will lose his or her citizenship.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

These do not exist in the Maldives.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Maldives



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for the Maldives shows:

- Pressure on Christians in the Maldives remained extremely high in all *spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to be at an extreme level. It decreased by 0.1 point back to a score of 15.4 as in WWL 2019
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church sphere*, where it almost reached the maximum score, reflecting that in practice no Christian meetings are possible. Most expatriate Christians also prefer not to organize meetings out of fear of repercussions. Scores in the *National, Family and Private spheres* are also at an extreme level. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Family spheres*. All politicians relentlessly claim that they are keeping the Maldives 100% Muslim, leaving effectively no space for any deviation. As the incidents reported in this country dossier show, the new government, inaugurated in

November 2018, has not deviated from that goal, although it has given more space to society in other aspects.

- The score for violence against Christians almost halved to 0.4, again confirming that persecution has never been very violent in the Maldives, but also reflecting that it is difficult to receive reports on incidents.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points)

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 the possession of such literature could result in imprisonment, even if it is on electronic devices. Even for migrant Christians it is dangerous to have 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 religious materials they are bringing in with them.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (4.00 points)

Given that all Maldivians have to be Muslims and given the ease with which bloggers and other social media users have been accused of being "apostates", it is highly risky for converts to reveal their faith in any form. And even the Christians among the migrant workers cannot reveal, let alone share, their faith safely in any way. Sharing their faith to a local would be highly risky even when done in their own language.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)

The authorities and local community are constantly looking out for images and symbols perceived as anti-Islamic. For example, in September 2018, sculptures from a newly built underwater art gallery, built by a resort, had to be destroyed as they were considered as 'idols' and therefore anti-Islamic. Occasionally, even randomly cross-shaped object like branches of a tree or the axis of a compass rose can be frowned upon. Any converts or Christians in general showing anti-Islamic symbols will quickly find themselves in trouble.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (4.00 points)

Christianity is outlawed, so no Christian will risk speaking about their faith with another Maldivian. For expatriate Christians, their job contracts even stipulate this condition. As quoted by the US State Department's IRF Report 2019 on page 4: "The law states, 'Non-Muslims living in or visiting the country are prohibited from openly expressing their religious beliefs, holding public congregations to conduct religious activities, or involving Maldivians in such activities.' By law, those expressing religious beliefs other than Islam face imprisonment of up to five years or house arrest, fines ranging from 5,000 to 20,000 rufiyaa (\$320 to \$1,300), and deportation."

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (4.00 points)

Since Christianity is forbidden in the country, baptisms cannot take place and would have to be done outside of the Maldives - and even then in secret, so that the conversion is not made known.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (4.00 points)

Expatriate Christians would usually be buried in their country of origin. But if they choose to be buried in the Maldives, it cannot be done according to Christian rites. For converts, a Christian burial is out of question; they will be buried with Muslim rites.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (4.00 points)

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. Although children of expatriate Christians are exempt from attending Islamic classes, Islam permeates the whole of school life and lessons, so that children of expatriate Christians prefer to attend international schools, if they can afford it.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (4.00 points)

In the very report that finally led to its ban, the Maldivian Democracy Network stated in 2015 that Islamic textbooks used in schools cultivate anti-semitism and xenophobia, and glorify *jihad* or war against those who allegedly "obstruct" Islam. An illustration of the prevailing climate in society occurred in January 2018, when parents raised their concerns about "blasphemous" content in secondary school textbooks. Screenshots of grade eight textbooks featuring explanations about Roman gods when explaining the names of the planets began circulating on social media and led to a prompt reaction by the government. Both examples show how much pressure children of Christians feel every day - even more so children of converts.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (4.00 points)

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. Maldivian society has become more strictly Islamic over the years. There has been a change in how Maldivian women dress: In earlier years, it was uncommon to see women wearing a black burka, but now (through Arabian influence) wearing the burka has become quite common and the pressure at least to wear a hijab is considerable. This affects Christians as well. In one famous example in 2018, a Muslim woman complained in a video on social media that she did not want to wear a veil. She was identified and had to leave her island and go into hiding because she received countless threats, including death-threats. During Ramadan, even migrant workers are not allowed to eat or drink at daytime and the newspapers publish how many people are taken into custody or fined during Ramadan for violations.

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)

As stated above, social control in the Maldives is extremely strong. Maldivians suspected of being Christian have been reported to the police. Expatriate Christians are not permitted to openly practice their faith and neither expatriate Christians nor Christians with a Muslim background have any real privacy. As quoted by the US State Department's IRF Report 2019 on page 10: "NGOs reported increasing instances of individuals deemed "secularists" or "apostates" receiving death threats, being cyberbullied, and being followed on the street by individuals with records as criminal gang members."

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (4.00 points)

All nationals are considered Muslims and are expected to take part in Islamic rituals and community events. This includes attendance at the local mosque as well. If they (try to) skip these events, this will raise suspicion. Any native Christian 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 eating and drinking in public.

Block 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (4.00 points)

If a convert owns a business and his Christian faith becomes known, it will be shut and he will face the consequences. But even for expatriate Christians, there is a suspicion that they are using their businesses for other means and thus, even the task of opening a business can be an uphill battle. As one country expert explained: "Contracts can be pulled with no notice or rational explanation."

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

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% 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. As quoted by the US State Department's IRF Report 2019 on page 5: "The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), with a reservation stating the government's application of the principles set out in ICCPR Article 18, which relates to religious freedom, shall be "without prejudice to the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives."

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

Any opinions that seem contrary to Islam (even voices of Islamic moderation) are subject to harsh criticism and even violence. Especially with the "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. The quick ban of Maldavian Democracy Network for statements made in a 2015 report is a good illustration for this.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

There are no Christian civil society organizations allowed in the country, let alone political parties. Expatriates are not allowed to be active in politics and cannot run Christian NGOs.

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (4.00 points)

Anything conveyed about Christians will almost always be negative and critical. But the negative descriptions are generally aimed in a corporate way at Christian outsiders, not directed at individuals within the Maldivian society, because all nationals are assumed to be Muslim. Expatriate Christians become targets of smear campaigns or hate-speech if they are perceived to be spreading their faith. Slandering someone as a suspected or known Christian, or sabotaging their home or business (for example), not only elicits no punishment but is seen as a patriotic duty.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

There was a fully functioning Christian church in the Maldives in the period 1950's -1976 which catered mainly for British military personnel and others. But today, the law prohibits the establishment of places of worship for non-Islamic religious groups. The law states “non-Muslims living in or visiting the country are prohibited from openly expressing their religious beliefs, holding public congregations to conduct religious activities or involving Maldivians in such activities.” The law further states that those expressing religious beliefs other than Islam face imprisonment of up to five years or house arrest, fines ranging of up to \$1,300 and deportation. For converts, it is out of the question to have an official gathering place for Christian activities.

Block 5.6: Work among youth in particular has been restricted. (4.00 points)

No Christian work among youth is allowed at all. Expatriate Christians strictly limit themselves to educating their own children in matters of Christian faith.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)

Expatriate Christians are monitored and so are their meetings, preaching and teaching. Especially in the capital city, Malé, there are CCTV cameras everywhere - including where Christians are known to gather. Maldives consists of small atolls, so everything is known and monitored.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

Importing Christian materials is illegal. Any national caught bringing Christian material into the Maldives will be detained and jailed. Expatriates are generally allowed very limited quantities of Christian literature for their personal use. If they bring in more, it will be confiscated and they may be detained or deported. Even a single Bible brought in by an expatriate can be confiscated if the authorities choose to follow the letter of the law precisely. As quoted by the US State Department's IRF Report 2019 on page 9: "In August the customs service confiscated 247 books from a public book fair in Male organized by a private bookshop for content that 'violated the principles of Islam' but did not file charges. Customs officials reported 18 cases involving importation of religious idols, statues, and Christian crosses during the year. Authorities confiscated these items but did not press charges."

Violence

For security reasons, no details about violent incidents involving Christians can be published.

5 Year trends

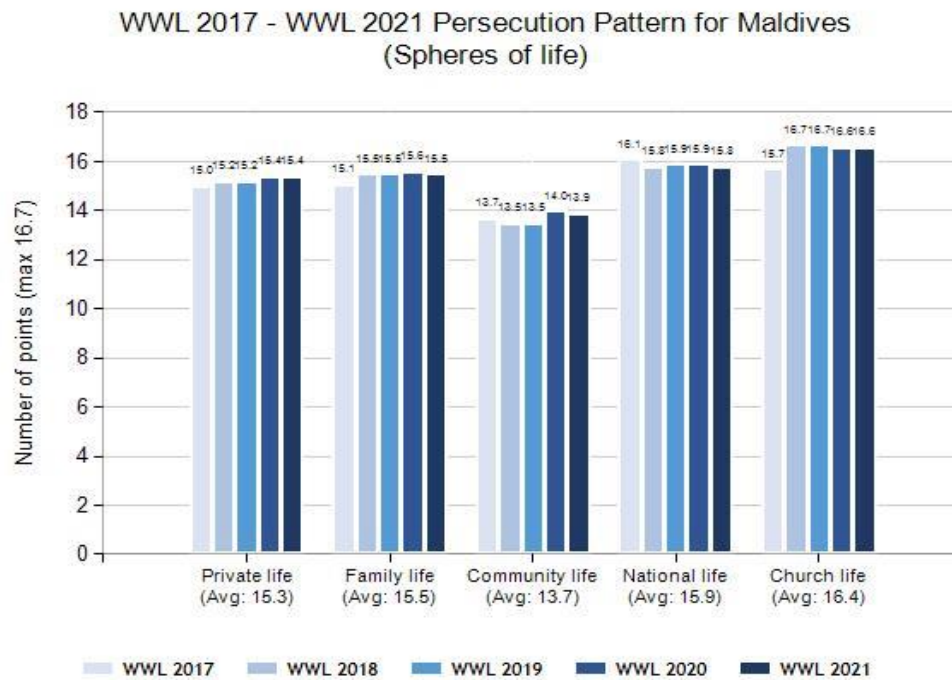
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Maldives: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	15.4
2020	15.5
2019	15.4
2018	15.3
2017	15.1

The table shows that the average score for pressure on Christians has been roughly stable at the extreme level of 15.1 - 15.5 points.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The table above shows the levels of pressure on Christians in individual *spheres of life* over the last five WWL reporting periods. The scores have not altered much over the years and have remained at very high and extreme levels. In *National Life*, the scores reflect the strong *Dictatorial paranoia*, whereas the other spheres reflect more the increasing *Islamic oppression*, although the motives are difficult to separate in practice. The (almost) maximum scores in *Church sphere* since WWL 2018 stand out, reflecting the fact that church life has become almost impossible.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As can be seen in the chart above, persecution has never been very violent in the Maldives. The violence score is currently at the lowest level for all 5 reporting periods.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Enforced religious dress code
Forced marriage
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological

Violence – sexual
Violence – Verbal

Given the extremely strict interpretation of Islam in the Maldives, Christian men and women must be secret believers. If a Christian woman or girl is discovered to be a Christian, every effort will be made to bring her back to Islam through forced marriage, verbal abuse, threats or other forms of violence. NGOs have [reported](#) ongoing community pressure on women to wear Islamic clothing and harassment of women who choose not to do so (US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report, Maldives 2019). As such they have little choice but to conform.

Despite the closely-knit social control on the islands, abuse, rape and sexual harassment are surprisingly common in a culture that generally excuses gender-based violence within the home. According to a country expert, “sexual abuse and child abuse is rising as well as domestic violence”. This observation is supported by [reports](#), which further note that the COVID-19 lockdown has been a contributing factor to a spike in violence (The Edition, 29 Oct 2020). Sexual and physical abuse are used as tools of religious persecution against Christian women.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Imprisonment by government
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

Being a Christian in the Maldives is so dangerous for both men and women that husbands, wives and children may not even know of each other's faith. The inability to meet as a community creates instability in the family and lack of access to Christian support, mentoring and training. If a Maldivian is found to be a secret Christian believer, he is likely to face bodily harm, harassment, threats, government imprisonment. Whilst there have been no reported cases in the past year, the threat of abduction is also tangible. In light of these pressures many choose to leave the country and go abroad, if they can afford to do so. If imprisoned the wider family will suffer financially and emotionally, and children are likely to be bullied at school.

Expatriate Christians also experience strong limitations in their day to day life, as well as feeling the emotional strain of those suffering around them.

Persecution of other religious minorities

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 imprisonment or even death (Humanists International, 8 October 2020).

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression:

The Maldives had one of the highest [per capita rates of Islamic militants fighting abroad](#) (NRC, 14 March 2017) and the new government is struggling to find strategies how to deal with returning fighters and their families. Additionally, the government is emphasizing its defense of being 100% Muslim and protecting and defending Islam will remain the top priority of the government, as could be seen in the quick banning of the NGO Maldivian Democracy Network (see above). Although the country relies heavily on international tourism, attempts to promote the unique attractiveness of the tourist resorts increasingly clashes with the country's staunch emphasis on a strict interpretation of Islam. It does not look as if the government would change this approach after the COVID-19 crisis seriously harmed the economy and damaged tourism. In such an atmosphere, expatriate Christians need to continue to be very cautious and local Christians will have to keep hiding their faith carefully.

Dictatorial paranoia:

As already said before, the high levels of paranoia under the previous government are gone. However, the country has a long track record of dictatorship and of politicians clinging to power, so religious minorities and atheists, among others, cannot expect any improvement in the freedom of religion in the near future. The level of *Dictatorial paranoia* in the Maldives has decreased, but it is not gone and the [road to democracy](#) will be long, winding and bumpy (The Diplomat, 1 November 2020).

Organized corruption and crime:

The island's younger generation continues to feel increasingly "disenfranchised and excluded" and "disconnected from the fabric of society", as indicated by a [World Bank report](#) 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 young Maldivians are being "denied passage into adulthood". These social issues translate into a growing radicalization, as seen in the numbers of Maldivians who joined the fighting in Iraq and Syria, which fuels *Islamic oppression*. Others join the country's gangs, which are well

connected with Maldivian power-brokers and politicians and are used as thugs against perceived enemies and dangers. As long as the younger generation lacks future perspectives, nothing will change in this respect.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: apostates - <http://maldivesindependent.com/society/apostates-jihadists-and-extremists-face-tough-new-punishments-137396>
- Persecution engines description: never allow freedom of religion - <http://maldivesindependent.com/society/will-not-allow-religious-freedom-in-maldives-says-defence-minister-137455>
- Persecution engines description: police meet - <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/three-questioned-in-hate-speech-probe-143460>
- Persecution engines description: secular - <https://miadhu.mv/article/en/12673>
- Persecution engines description: 100% Islamic - <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/islam-infrastructure-and-foreign-pressure-maldives-president-on-campaign-trail-139123>
- Persecution engines description: sentence - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/10/maldives-ex-vice-president-jailed-again-for-money-laundering/>
- Persecution engines description: disclosure - <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/extremist-group-masterminded-murders-and-abduction-144412>
- Persecution engines description: gang involvement - <https://cpj.org/blog/2019/03/maldives-commission-justice-rilwan-rasheed-blogger-murder.php>
- Drivers of persecution description: shutdown - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/maldives-ngo-closure-shows-repression-hasnt-gone-away/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: reported - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/MALDIVES-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: reports - <https://edition.mv/news/20068>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: atheism - <https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-southern-asia/maldives/>
- Future outlook: per capita rates of Islamic militants fighting abroad - <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2017/where-jihadists-are-heroes/>
- Future outlook: road to democracy - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/10/jj-robinson-on-the-maldives-return-to-democracy/>
- Future outlook: World Bank report - <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/460551468263693729/pdf/939490WPOP15300th0Report0with0cover.pdf>

Further useful reports

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

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