



# MAURITANIA: Country Dossier

December 2018



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

December 2018

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# World Watch List 2019

WWL 2019		1. Private life	2. Family life	3. Community life	4. National life	5. Church life	6. Violence score	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2019	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014	
Rank	Country	(Max. score per block is 16.7)												
1	North Korea	16,7	16,7	16,7	16,7	16,7	10,9	94	94	92	92	92	90	
2	Afghanistan	16,7	16,7	16,7	16,7	16,7	10,6	94	93	89	88	81	78	
3	Somalia	16,3	16,7	16,6	16,5	16,4	8,9	91	91	91	87	90	80	
4	Libya	15,3	15,0	15,1	16,0	16,3	9,6	87	86	78	79	76	71	
5	Pakistan	14,3	14,1	13,9	15,0	13,2	16,7	87	86	88	87	79	77	
6	Sudan	14,7	15,0	14,6	15,6	16,1	10,6	87	87	87	84	80	73	
7	Eritrea	14,7	14,9	15,8	16,0	15,2	9,4	86	86	82	89	79	72	
8	Yemen	16,6	16,3	16,4	16,7	16,7	3,1	86	85	85	78	73	74	
9	Iran	14,0	14,3	14,3	15,8	16,5	10,4	85	85	85	83	80	77	
10	India	12,9	13,0	13,5	14,8	13,2	15,2	83	81	73	68	62	55	
11	Syria	13,6	14,0	13,1	13,8	14,2	13,0	82	76	86	87	83	79	
12	Nigeria	12,3	11,8	13,4	12,9	12,9	16,7	80	77	78	78	78	70	
13	Iraq	13,9	14,4	14,1	14,6	13,6	8,1	79	86	86	90	86	78	
14	Maldives	15,2	15,5	13,5	15,9	16,7	1,1	78	78	76	76	78	77	
15	Saudi Arabia	15,1	13,6	14,0	15,3	16,5	2,4	77	79	76	76	77	78	
16	Egypt	11,7	13,2	10,7	13,2	11,0	15,9	76	70	65	64	61	61	
17	Uzbekistan	15,4	12,9	13,9	12,3	15,9	3,1	74	73	71	70	69	68	
18	Myanmar	11,4	11,8	13,3	12,1	11,8	11,1	71	65	62	62	60	59	
19	Laos	13,0	9,1	14,2	14,7	14,9	4,6	71	67	64	58	58	62	
20	Vietnam	12,7	8,2	12,7	13,5	14,2	9,1	70	69	71	66	68	65	
21	Central Africa Republic	10,2	9,7	11,9	10,6	11,1	16,1	70	61	58	59	67	67	
22	Algeria	13,1	14,2	10,1	11,8	12,7	7,6	70	58	58	56	55	54	
23	Turkmenistan	14,6	10,8	13,8	13,3	15,1	1,3	69	68	67	66	63	62	
24	Mali	11,4	10,1	11,5	9,2	9,9	15,4	68	59	59	55	52	54	
25	Mauritania	13,9	14,0	12,2	13,0	13,3	0,6	67	57	55	(not in Top 50)	50	51	
26	Turkey	12,4	11,1	10,7	13,2	10,9	7,2	66	62	57	55	52	(not in Top 50)	
27	China	10,4	8,0	10,3	11,8	14,5	10,0	65	57	57	57	57	51	
28	Ethiopia	10,0	10,0	10,3	10,8	10,4	13,5	65	62	64	67	61	65	
29	Tajikistan	13,8	11,9	11,6	12,1	12,9	2,4	65	65	58	58	50	47	
30	Indonesia	10,6	11,1	11,3	10,2	9,3	12,0	65	59	55	55	50	46	
31	Jordan	13,0	13,1	11,8	11,5	12,2	3,0	65	66	63	59	56	56	
32	Nepal	12,4	11,4	10,6	10,9	11,9	7,0	64	64	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	
33	Bhutan	12,9	11,1	12,3	12,4	14,0	0,9	64	62	61	56	56	54	
34	Kazakhstan	13,2	10,8	10,3	12,2	13,5	3,1	63	63	56	55	51	49	
35	Morocco	12,2	13,3	9,6	12,0	14,4	1,5	63	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	47	
36	Brunei	13,4	14,3	10,5	10,3	13,4	0,7	63	64	64	61	58	57	
37	Tunisia	12,1	13,2	10,7	11,2	12,0	3,3	63	62	61	58	55	55	
38	Qatar	13,0	12,6	10,3	11,0	14,1	1,1	62	63	66	65	64	63	
39	Mexico	8,3	7,5	12,2	10,2	9,7	13,5	61	59	57	56	55	(not in Top 50)	
40	Kenya	11,7	10,6	10,1	8,3	11,5	8,3	61	62	68	68	63	48	
41	Russian Federation	12,5	8,4	10,7	10,4	12,0	5,7	60	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	(not in Top 50)	
42	Malaysia	11,8	14,2	12,1	11,7	8,6	1,5	60	65	60	58	55	49	
43	Kuwait	13,2	12,2	10,1	10,5	12,2	1,5	60	61	57	56	49	50	
44	Oman	12,9	12,5	9,8	9,6	12,8	1,7	59	57	53	53	55	56	
45	United Arab Emirates	12,8	12,0	9,1	10,5	12,2	1,9	58	58	55	55	49	51	
46	Sri Lanka	11,0	8,3	10,5	11,5	10,0	7,0	58	57	55	(not in Top 50)	51	55	
47	Colombia	7,9	7,6	11,8	9,4	8,5	12,6	58	56	53	55	55	56	
48	Bangladesh	11,0	9,1	11,6	10,5	7,8	7,8	58	58	63	57	51	46	
49	Palestinian Territories	11,4	12,3	9,0	10,6	11,8	2,4	57	60	64	62	58	53	
50	Azerbaijan	13,2	9,9	9,3	11,1	12,4	1,5	57	57	(not in Top 50)	57	50	(not in Top 50)	

## World Watch List 2019: Persecution watch countries (PWC) - Countries scoring 41 points or more, but not reaching the Top 50

WWL 2019		1. Private life	2. Family life	3. Community life	4. National life	5. Church life	6. Violence score	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2019	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	(Max. score per block is 16.7)							
51	Comoros	11,7	11,5	9,1	9,9	13,9	0,4	56	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	12,7	9,9	10,9	9,2	11,9	1,9	56	54
53	Djibouti	12,3	12,3	10,3	10,0	11,2	0,0	56	56
54	Congo DR (DRC)	5,6	6,7	9,3	7,4	10,3	16,1	55	(Below 41 points)
55	Bahrain	11,9	12,2	8,6	10,2	10,2	1,5	55	57
56	Cameroon	9,9	7,3	10,0	7,8	7,5	11,3	54	(Below 41 points)
57	Tanzania	9,3	10,8	10,3	8,6	8,8	4,8	52	53
58	Niger	11,5	9,7	8,1	8,1	10,0	4,8	52	45
59	Cuba	8,8	4,4	9,1	10,5	11,8	3,9	49	49
60	Chad	11,5	8,2	9,0	8,0	8,7	3,0	48	(Below 41 points)
61	Burkina Faso	9,0	8,0	8,8	6,6	7,9	7,2	48	(Below 41 points)
62	Uganda	11,4	8,0	7,7	6,9	9,6	3,7	47	46
63	Guinea	10,3	7,5	8,3	7,0	8,1	5,0	46	(Below 41 points)
64	South Sudan	5,7	1,5	7,5	5,8	8,0	15,0	44	(Below 41 points)
65	Mozambique	6,7	4,3	6,0	6,9	6,0	13,3	43	(Below 41 points)
66	Gambia	7,7	8,2	8,2	8,3	8,8	1,9	43	(Below 41 points)
67	Ivory Coast	9,8	8,7	8,2	5,5	6,4	4,3	43	(Below 41 points)
68	Burundi	5,1	5,8	9,7	9,2	9,6	3,3	43	(Below 41 points)
69	Angola	6,4	3,6	7,1	8,7	10,4	6,1	42	(Below 41 points)
70	Togo	8,8	6,7	8,5	7,1	8,4	2,0	42	(Below 41 points)
71	Venezuela	3,3	3,8	10,5	9,0	8,8	5,9	41	(Below 41 points)
72	Nicaragua	2,4	3,6	6,4	8,9	7,9	11,9	41	(Below 41 points)
73	Rwanda	5,3	4,4	6,7	7,8	10,1	6,7	41	(Below 41 points)

# MAURITANIA – Country Dossier (December 2018)

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## Introduction

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

World Watch List Mauritania	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	67	25
WWL 2018	57	47
WWL 2017	55	47
WWL 2016	-	-
WWL 2015	50	48

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.*

**Please note:** 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”.

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

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

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

## WWL 2019: 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 in 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. According to [BTI Mauritania 2018](#) (p. 25): "Unemployment is high, at 31% [...]. Youth unemployment remains critical: Unemployment affects more young people: as two out of three unemployed are less than 35 years old. [...] The

World Bank said in 2013 that the government must pay close attention to 'issues of youth exclusion and unemployment, especially in urban areas, which have the potential to increase religious extremism and violence among marginalized groups'".

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 ethnic 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.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Mauritania

- The socio-economic landscape: BTI Mauritania 2018  
[http://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2018/pdf/BTI\\_2018\\_Mauritania.pdf](http://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2018/pdf/BTI_2018_Mauritania.pdf)

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
4,540,000	10,100	0.2

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

### 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](#). With the arrival of Islam in Mauritania a process of Arabization and Islamization began which seems to have extinguished any Christian 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. The diocese was [reportedly](#) "founded on the 18th December 1965, five years after the end of the French protectorate rule and the proclamation of independence." 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." According to Pazzanita G.A, the Protestant church is not so well-established in the country. (Historical Dictionary of Mauritania, p. 282)

### What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Mauritania	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	5,200	51.5
Protestant	2,300	22.8
Independent	2,300	22.8
Unaffiliated	300	3.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,100</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		



Evangelical movement	1,300	12.9
Renewalist movement	2,800	27.7

*Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.*

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to the World Christian Database (WCD), the majority of Christians in Mauritania are Roman Catholic. There is a small number of indigenous Christians with a Muslim background that have to live their faith in secrecy. Other than the Catholics, there are some non-denominational Christians from neighboring countries or further abroad.

## Religious context

Religious Context: Mauritania	Numbers	%
Christians	10,100	0.2
Muslim	4,505,000	99.2
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	20,100	0.4
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	440	0.0
Atheist	370	0.0
Agnostic	4,500	0.1
Other	0	0.0

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

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

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 to Muslims.

- In April 2018, Mauritania [adopted a new law](#) which makes the death penalty mandatory for apostasy and blasphemy. Previously, the 'offender' was given three days to recant the decision to convert. The law was adopted in response to a decision of the Court of Appeals to commute the death sentence to two years imprisonment for a blogger who allegedly posted blasphemous material (while he was actually addressing religiously motivated racism which he and his caste had experienced).

## External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- How did Christians get there?: statement against Roman rule  
<https://www.thoughtco.com/early-christianity-in-north-africa-part-1-44461>
- How did Christians get there?: reportedly  
<http://www.southworld.net/the-catholic-church-in-mauritania/>
- Notes on the current situation: adopted a new law  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/04/mauritania-mandatory-death-penalty-blasphemy>

## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

In WWL 2019, Mauritania rose from a score of 57 points in WWL 2018 to a score of 67 points. In addition to the increased pressure as indicated by the tightening of the blasphemy and apostasy law, access to more detailed information has led to a further increase in points.

### What type of persecution dominates?

- **Islamic oppression:** Islamism is the dominant political ideology in the country. Non-Muslims experience intimidation and persecution particularly at the hands of Islamic groups.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** Corruption occurs at all levels and there is no democratic culture that respects the rights of citizens.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** Attempts are made to force tribal traditions mixed with Islamic values (e.g. tribe and family honor) upon Christian converts.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** The current government is determined to hold on to power and tries to shore up its legitimacy among Islamic groups by persecuting Christians and providing funds for Wahhabi and other radical Islamic movements.

### Who is driving persecution?

The influence of radical Islamic ideology is on the rise, including actions taken by the government to implement dormant Sharia laws. Radical Islamic preachers contribute greatly to the radicalization of society and fuel hatred towards non-Muslims. Family and societal pressure is especially intense for Christians with a Muslim background. Christians face the risk of attacks by militant groups such as al-Qaeda in the Maghreb.

### What it results in

Collective acts of worship are particularly difficult due to the restrictive environment which makes it impossible for Christians (especially for converts from Islam) to openly meet and conduct services. Any expression of faith by non-Mauritanian Christians (e.g. migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa or aid-workers) also carries the risk of being understood as attempted proselytization of Muslims and leads to prosecution.

### Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

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

WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	0	0	0	0
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*Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.*

## Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

During WWL 2019:

- 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.
- All churches, including the Catholic Church, have to operate carefully in order to avoid accusations of proselytism.

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

In WWL 2019, Mauritania rose from a score of 57 points in WWL 2018 to a score of 67 points. In addition to the increased pressure as indicated by the tightening of the blasphemy and apostasy law, access to more detailed information has led to a further increase in points. Also, Mauritania's score for violence rose from zero to 0.5. However, this low score may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

### Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Mauritania	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Strong
Denominational protectionism	DPR	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	Strong

*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 (long version).*

#### **Islamic oppression (Very strong):**

This is the primary persecution engine operating in Mauritania. Mauritania is a self-proclaimed Islamic Republic and Islamism is the dominant political ideology in the country. Non-Muslims experience intimidation and persecution particularly at the hands of Islamic groups. Large numbers of Mauritians have joined Islamic militant groups both in the northern African region and in Syria and Iraq. While the government tries to fight Islamic militancy on one side, at the same time it provides funding for Wahhabi and other radical Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

#### **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. The campaign against slavery has triggered a hostile reaction from Islamists in the country.

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

Tribal affiliation, religious and/or personal relationships are very important in Mauritanian society. Nepotism, clientelism and other forms of corruption are widespread, also within the government. Anti-corruption campaigns have only been focussing on minor figures. Journalists investigating specific cases of corruption by state authorities or state-owned companies have been intimidated, detained and accused of defamation ([BTI Mauritania 2018](#), p. 10). Powerful people with connections to the army and presidency can enrich themselves and act with impunity.

#### Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

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

### Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Mauritania	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	STRONG	-	-	-	MEDIUM	STRONG
Government officials	Very strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Medium	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Strong	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	Medium
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	-	Weak	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

*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 (long version).*

#### Drivers of Islamic oppression:

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 this kind of persecution.

**Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:**

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 are also supported by tribal leaders. Hence, conservative tribal leaders intent on preserving ethnic hierarchy and social order are also drivers of persecution in Mauritania.

**Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:**

Government officials and those in power use the system for self-enrichment. Organized crime and the role of the government are sometimes hard to distinguish, but they control most of the economy and permeate the country with a sense of hopelessness and maintain high levels of poverty. This poverty and endemic corruption contribute to persecution in that rule of law is not followed, and Christians have little hope of obtaining stable employment and of earning an honest income.

**Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:**

The government tries to maintain power at all costs, even if that means appeasing Islamic radicals by persecuting Christians. The tightened apostasy law is a clear example of this mechanism.

## 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.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Roman Catholic expatriates from Sub-Saharan Africa make up the largest group, followed by Protestants and Evangelicals also from countries to the south of Mauritania. There is also a small Western Christian presence, but they are a very small percentage of the Christian population in the country. Ethnic African migrant Christians lead a precarious existence in the country due to the prevalence of ethnic prejudices and also the persecution that is related with the increasing Islamism in the country.

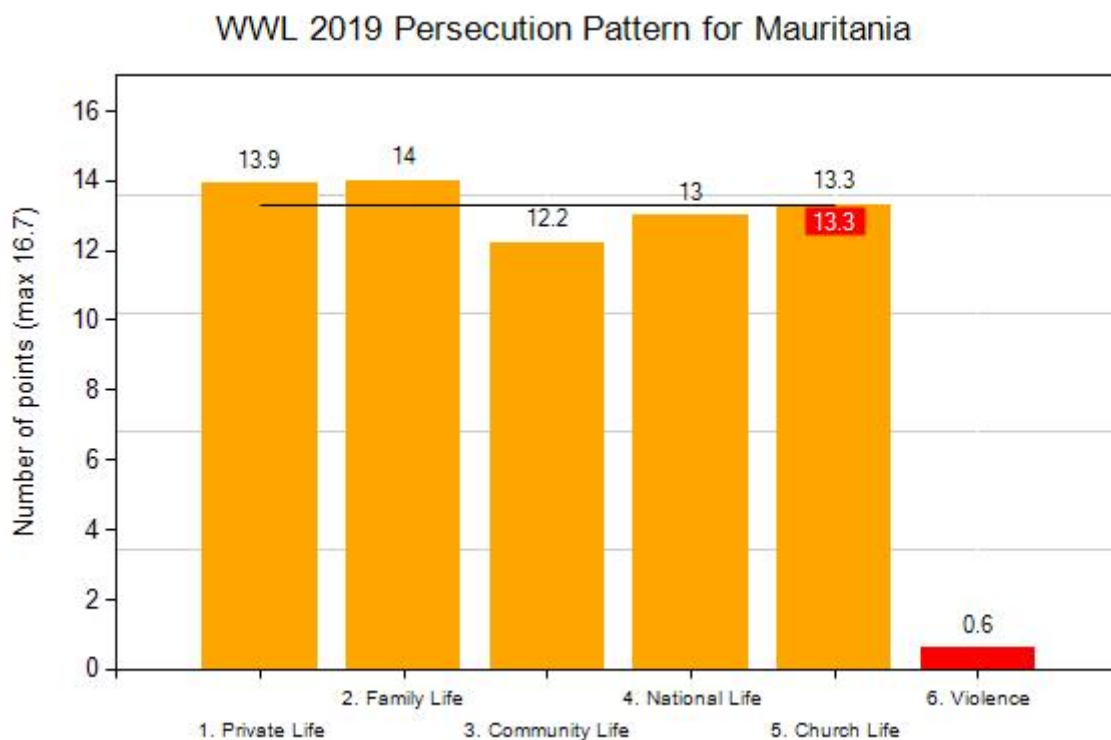
**Historical Christian communities:** This category of Christians does not exist in Mauritania.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christian converts from a Muslim background are most exposed to persecution and face an enormous amount of pressure from their immediate and extended family. In this nomadic society where communal interdependence and the extended family are necessary for one's survival, converts face a huge challenge to keep their Christian faith hidden from view. The hatred and false stereotypes that are propagated against Christians by Islamic groups affect most converts; they lose not only their status in their community but also their citizenship if their conversion becomes public knowledge.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** This category of Christians does not exist in Mauritania.



## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Mauritania shows:

- The average pressure on Christians remains at a very high level (13.3), rising from 11.4 in WWL 2018. The reason for this increase is the overall rise in pressure in all *spheres of life*, as indicated by the tightening of the blasphemy and apostasy law as more information becoming available which led to higher scores.
- Although all *spheres of life* show very high or extreme levels of pressure, pressure is highest in *Private* and *Family life*. This reflects the enormous pressure converts have to deal with. In Mauritania's tribal culture, leaving Islam is not only religious betrayal, but also betrayal of the tribe and family. Understandably, in such a culture there is no room for being baptized or having a Christian marriage or funeral.
- The score for violence went up from zero in WWL 2018 to 0.5 in WWL 2019. However, this low score may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

### 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:**

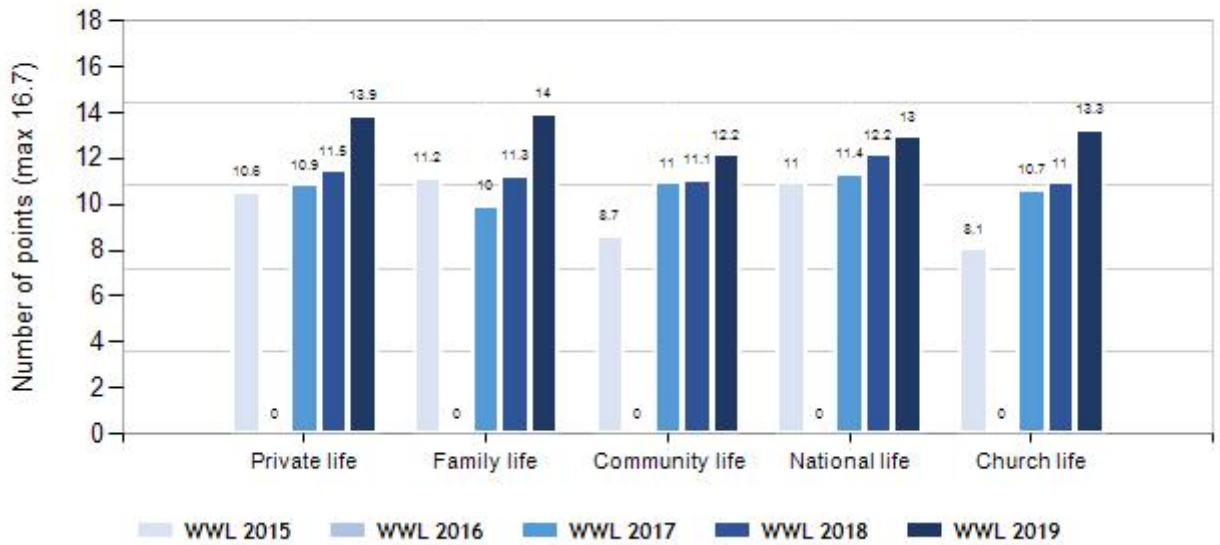
Violence against Christians remained at a very low level. There are two reasons for this: Firstly, all converts know the consequences if their faith is discovered, and so do other Christians if they do not operate carefully (e.g. abstaining from evangelism). Thus, by laying low, Christians avoid violence against them. Secondly, Mauritania is a closed country; while it is suspected that converts from Islam to Christianity in Mauritania suffer from violent persecution at the hands of their (extended) family members and from neighbors and society at large, it is difficult to get confirmed reports of such incidents out of the country.

For a summary of the statistics on violence, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

## **5 Year trends**

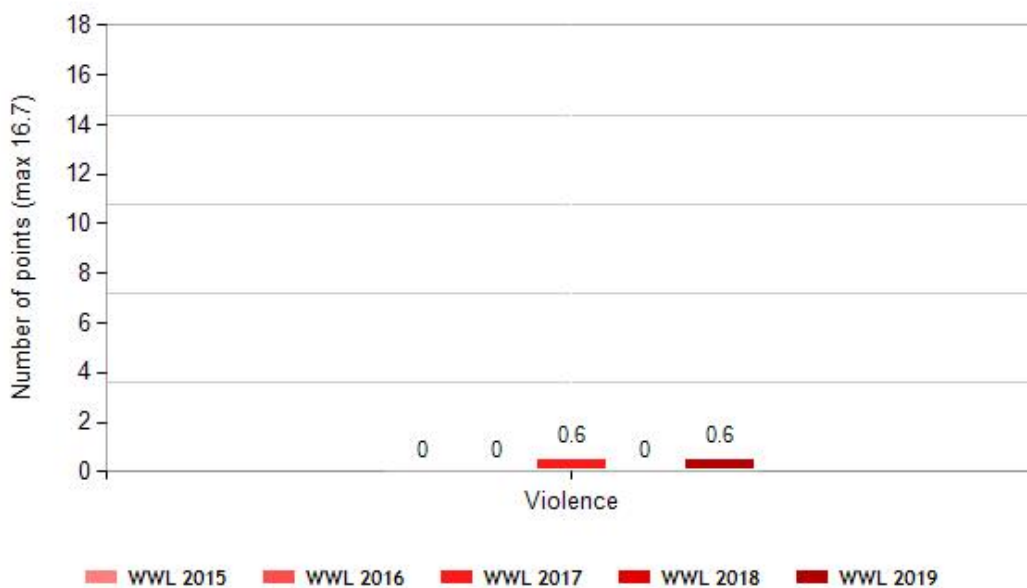
While the levels of pressure in the *all spheres of life* have been more or less stable over the first four years (first chart), there have been notable increases in the pressure in the *private, family and church spheres of life* in the WWL 2019 reporting period. The second chart, showing average pressure, shows the same pattern, with the level rising from high to very high. This increase is mainly do to a review of the situation in the country, with more information becoming available which has affected the scoring. The low number of violent incidents recorded in Mauritania has not changed dramatically over the five years. The scores for violence (third chart) have thus remained more or less stable at a very low level. However, this low score may well be due to a lack of reports on incidents getting out of the country.

### WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Mauritania (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Mauritania	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	13.3
2018	11.4
2017	10.8
2016	0.0
2015	9.9

### WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Mauritania (Violence)



## Gender specific persecution

### Female:

Within the tribal society, women are subject to the authority of their fathers and husbands. Leaving Islam means disregarding them and shaming the honor of the family. This will have severe consequences, especially since most women and girls are (financially) totally dependent on their families. In general, women can be easily divorced and polygamy is still practiced. Married female converts can easily be divorced and end up with no means to survive. In general, most women do not have a choice in marriage. Unmarried female converts might find themselves forced into a marriage with a Muslim man to keep them under the influence of Islamic family life, and can also face sexual abuse and harassment.

### Male:

If the government does not reverse the trend of the last few years of excluding ethnic Africans from the work force and forcing migrant workers to pay large fees to stay in the country, many Sub-Saharan African Christians will be forced to leave or live very difficult lives. This is a major racial/human rights issue that is spilling over to hurt Christians as well - since so many of them are ethnic Africans and not of Arab descent.

Male converts bring shame upon their (extended) family and are most likely to be ostracized, losing all respect and status in society. They can also face (physical) abuse.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Apart from the Christian minority, there is also a very small but growing Shia Muslim minority in Mauritania. While the government has good ties with Iran and does not target this community, Sunni religious leaders denounce this minority group and call for restrictive measures to be taken against the Shia Muslims. According to the [Mauritania 2017 International Religious Freedom Report](#) (p. 6): "During the annual Eid al-Adha observance on September 1, Imam Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Nouakchott, renewed his warning of what he called the spread and growing threat of Shia Islam in the country. The imam also stated for a second successive year that government authorities should sever ties with Iran in order to stop the spread of Iranian Shia Islam."

## Future outlook

**The political 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. The turbulence and political instability that characterizes the country's history does not bode well for the future. The poverty of the country as well as the growing 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, also gives rise to concern about the future for Christians in Mauritania.

### The outlook for Christians - as viewed through the lens of:

- **Islamic oppression:** Islamic oppression is likely to continue as a major persecution engine in Mauritania. There are no signs that this will improve in the near future. The

tightening of the blasphemy law indicates rather a worsening, although the situation will probably not change in practice. The influence of radical Islamic groups is growing and this could seriously worsen the situation in the long term.

- **Ethnic antagonism:** Although the country is urbanizing and the arrival of the internet and social media has brought change, it is not likely that tribal attitudes will change soon. Racism and *Ethnic antagonism* will most probably remain, especially now the government is actively working towards Arabization of the workforce.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** The migrant church is in a state of crisis. New laws are making it hard to stay in the country, few migrant Christians can find work, few also have the necessary resources to stay in the country legally. Some have chosen to stay and pay extra bribes, while others have chosen to leave.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** The current government is determined to hold on to power and tries to shore up its legitimacy among Islamic groups by persecuting Christians. This attitude is not likely to change.

**Conclusion:** Overall, the signs are that Christians will probably face more pressure in the future. The situation for converts is not likely to improve, while Sub-Saharan migrants might be forced out of the country due to the Arabization of the workforce. The small number of Christians will most probably remain small for the next few years.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: BTI Mauritania 2018  
<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/MRT/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Mauritania 2017 International Religious Freedom Report  
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281008.pdf>

## Additional Reports and Articles

### WWR in-depth reports

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

### Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

### Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).