

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

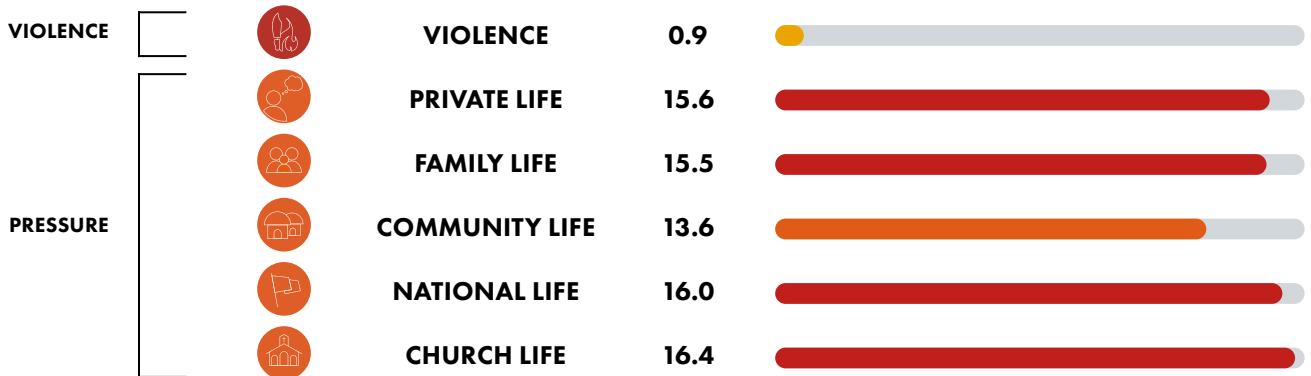
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
18

MALDIVES



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

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 by its members, which naturally includes religious choice. Being a citizen of the Maldives means being a Muslim. Conversion to Christianity can thus easily result in being reported to Muslim leaders or the authorities. Apart from the conservative Islamic attitudes of the general population, the Maldives also struggles with radicalized segments of society, some of them battle-hardened from fighting in places like Syria. Armed criminal gangs are prime targets for jihadi recruiters, and radicalized gangs would target anyone not sufficiently Muslim. 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.

Quick facts

LEADER

President-elect Mohamed Muizzi

POPULATION

535,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Hundreds (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	Hundreds	-

Source¹

Politics in the Maldives always carries religious undertones, and leaders have reiterated the goal to protect the Maldives from becoming less than 100% Sunni Muslim. As politics are often family business, rifts, changing coalitions and surprise political moves are quite usual, as has been shown in the WWL 2024 reporting period when Speaker of parliament and former President Mohamed Nasheed [joined forces](#) with a former rival parties in order to oust President Solih (The Diplomat, 10 July 2023). In September 2023, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu of the Progressive Party of the Maldives was elected as President of the Maldives.

The Maldives has been a land in turmoil in recent years (excluding the islands used as tourist resorts). Civil liberties are becoming 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) and the closing of the NGO “Maldives Democracy Network” in November 2019.

The [stabbing](#) of three foreign nationals in Malé in

February 2020 (BBC News, 6 February 2020) and the [police raid on Maduvvari island](#) targeting a radical Islamic group in December 2019 (AP, 20 December 2019) show that the Maldives is also struggling with violent militancy. So far, Christians have kept a low profile and have not been a particular target for radical Muslims. The small indigenous 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.

The legal framework remains restrictive towards women and girls, primarily due to the influence of Sharia law. Maldivian Muslim women [cannot marry](#) a man of a different religion, unlike Muslim men; this makes it harder for female converts to Christianity to marry a Christian, as they are still considered Muslims under the law. The Maldives has the highest divorce rate in the world, with a nine out of ten ratio. 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.

The small number of Christians suffers from a lack of options for meeting together, which results in isolation and social problems.

¹ According to OD-estimate

How the situation varies by region

Persecution takes place away from the islands reserved for international tourists.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians often come from India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. These communities are monitored closely, including any visible gatherings of Christians, such as marriages and baptisms. However, most expat Christians have the freedom to meet (in embassies,

for example), provided they do not have contact with local Maldivians or indigenous converts from Islam.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity with a Muslim background face the most severe violations as, officially, they do not exist in the country. Anyone leaving Islam will lose his/her citizenship.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

The government sees itself as the protector of Islam. Officially, there are no Maldivian Christians. Policy from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Ministry of Defense is that apostates are not to be tolerated and that the government will never allow freedom of religion.

Dictatorial paranoia

Islamic oppression is blended with dictatorial paranoia because political parties woo voters by being the best protector of Islam.

Organized corruption and crime

Corruption has been rampant at all levels of government and officials are motivated by bribes, favors and threats. Government officials have previously employed street gangs to intimidate, vandalize the property of and attack more secular political opponents. As a country expert explained: "Armed criminal gangs are prime targets for jihadi recruiters, and radicalized gangs would target anyone not sufficiently Muslim."



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Given the extremely strict interpretation of Islam, Christian men and women must be secret believers. If a Christian woman or girl is discovered to be a Christian, efforts will be made to bring her back to Islam through forced marriage, verbal abuse, threats or other forms of violence. Despite the close-knit social control on the islands, abuse, rape and sexual harassment are common in a culture that generally excuses gender-based violence within the home. Sexual and physical abuse are used as tools of religious persecution against Christian women.

Female typical pressure points:

- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

Men

If a Maldivian man is found to be a secret Christian believer, he is likely to endure bodily harm, harassment, threats or government imprisonment (although there have been no such cases in recent years). In light of this pressure, many choose to leave the country and live 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.

Male typical pressure points:

- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	18	78
2023	15	77
2022	16	77
2021	15	77
2020	14	78

In WWL 2024, the level of pressure on Christians remained very high, resulting in a slightly increasing total score. The still very low violence score increased to slightly less than one point. Converts have literally no space at all to live out their Christian faith, and expatriate Christians (often migrant workers) lack possibilities for worshiping together without fearing arrest and deportation. Consequently, the Maldives is one of the few countries where the score for pressure in the Church sphere continues to reach almost maximum points. The government elected in October 2023 will have other priorities, no improvements in the situation of Christians are to be expected.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.





Private life

Converts to Christianity keep their faith secret and hide Bibles and other Christian materials, since possessing them could lead to imprisonment. Obtaining Christian materials in the native Dhivehi language is particularly risky, as authorities may suspect they are being used to evangelize the local population. The authorities and community members will remove symbols perceived to be anti-Islamic. For example, in December 2020, police removed Christmas decorations from resorts, as they were deemed to offend the sensitivities of some religious factions. For expatriate Christians, job contracts often stipulate that those expressing non-Islamic beliefs can face imprisonment of up to five years, house arrest, fines ranging from 5,000 to 20,000 rufiyaa (\$320 to \$1,300) and deportation.

Family life

Baptisms and Christian funerals must be performed in secret. The Constitution states in Article 36 (c): “Education shall strive to inculcate obedience to Islam.” Children of converts to Christianity are forced to study Islamic teachings. Although children of expatriate Christians are exempt from attending Islamic classes, Islam permeates the whole of school life. If they can afford it, Christian expatriate parents often send their children to international schools.

Community life

High population density, social homogeneity, and active government policy oriented towards Islam mean social pressure is extremely high., especially in the capital, Malé. One example is the recent widespread adoption of the black burka. Incidents

of women refusing to veil, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have resulted in forced exile or violence. Another example of forced Islamization by the wider community is the requirement to fast during Ramadan, regardless of an individual’s faith, with refusal resulting in arrest and public humiliation. Christians therefore are under constant pressure to conform to avoid harassment, loss of economic opportunity, or, in extreme cases, violence.

National life

The Constitution refers to the country as ‘100% Muslim’, and government regulations are based on Islamic law. One article states: “It is illegal to propagate any other religion than Islam.” Penalties for violating this range from house arrest to imprisonment of up to five years. If the offenders are foreigners, they will usually be deported. The ‘Defamation Law’ in place includes clauses against anti-Islamic comments.

Church life

The law prohibits the establishment of places of worship for non-Islamic religious groups, stating, “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.” Importing Christian materials is illegal and those guilty will be detained and jailed. Police and customs have confiscated Christian material and letters sent through the mail, which may portray values or ways of life against Islam. Expatriates are allowed very limited quantities of Christian literature for their personal use.

International obligations & rights violated

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

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

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 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 the 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 to traditional Islamic dress code (ICCPR Art. 18 and CEDAW Art. 2)

Situation 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).

The US State Department IRFR 2022 Maldives states: "NGOs continued to state that persistent online and in-person threats against individuals perceived to be insufficiently Muslim effectively foreclosed the possibility of meaningful discussion on religious issues in the country. NGOs reported that the government continued to fail to take action against online death threats and attacks against persons perceived to be critical of Islam." (Page 11)

Open Doors in Maldives

Open Doors provides prayer support for Christians in the Maldives.



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
