

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
15

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

Maldivians are expected to be Muslims. 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 their members, which includes religion. Conversion to Christianity can 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 watched closely. This makes gathering for worship very difficult. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many expat Christians left the country. They are slowly returning as the country reopens to tourism.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih

POPULATION

541,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Hundreds (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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. Christians have to maintain caution in the way they conduct themselves since they are not allowed to publicly show any presence as a Christian community. The legal framework of the Maldives 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 Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians is 'hundreds'. For security reasons, no breakdown of religions can be published.

Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	Hundreds	-

Source¹

After the ousting of the first democratically elected president, Mohamed Nasheed, in 2012, his successors have frequently reiterated the goal to protect the country from becoming less than 100% Sunni Muslim. Opposition forces (including those perceived as a danger to the rulers) have been driven out of the country or arrested. On May 7 2021, a bomb exploded outside Nasheed's house as he got into his car; radical Islamic groups are suspected to be behind the attack. Nasheed is now the speaker of Parliament. Former president Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom, who is now in opposition, continues to attack the government with a fierce anti-India campaign, adding to an already politically volatile situation.

Civil liberties are increasingly restricted. This includes media and social media, demonstrated by the killing of well-known blogger Yameen Rasheed in April 2017 and the closing of the non-governmental organization (NGO), Maldives Democratic Network, in November 2019. So far, it does not appear 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.

¹ According to OD-estimate

How the situation varies by region

Persecution takes place outside 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 stay strictly together and 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 by far 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 Islamic government still sees itself as the protector of Islam and prohibits Maldivians from converting. Officially there are no Maldivian Christians, only expatriate Christians. Official policy from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Ministry of Defense is that apostates can never be tolerated and that the government will never allow freedom of religion.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Islamic oppression is blended with dictatorial paranoia, because Islam is being used as a justification for limiting political freedom. Freedom of religion continues to be restricted since 'protection of religion' is understood to mean the 'protection of Islam'.

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption has been rampant at all levels of government and officials are motivated by bribes, favors and threats. Additionally, government officials have previously employed street gangs to intimidate, vandalize the property of, and even attack, more secular political opponents.

- 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.

- Imprisonment by the government
- 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
2023	15	77
2022	16	77
2021	15	77
2020	14	78
2019	14	78

In WWL 2023, the level of pressure on Christians remained very high, resulting in an almost unchanged score. The very low violence score remained at the same level as in previous years. 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 score for pressure in the Church sphere continues to reach almost maximum points. The new government, which took over in mid-November 2018, has made no tangible improvements as regards freedom of religion and is more focused on internal political struggles.

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, every effort 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 surprisingly 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.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

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

Private life

Converts to Christianity always have to exercise the utmost care to hide their faith. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be carefully hidden as the possession of such literature could result in 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 the community are constantly searching for symbols perceived to be anti-Islamic. For example, in December 2020, police removed Christmas decorations (including a Christmas tree) 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 in the Maldives. This is especially true in the capital, Malé. One example is the recent and widespread adoption of the black burka (through Arab influence). 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 keep the fasting requirements of Ramadan, regardless of an individual’s faith, with refusal resulting in arrest and public humiliation by the news and media. The government mandates participation in online Islamic and cultural classes for Maldivians living abroad. 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. 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. If the offenders are foreigners, they will usually be deported. As quoted by the US State Department’s IRF Report 2020: “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.’” The ‘Defamation Law’ in place includes clauses against anti-Islamic comments.

Church life

A functioning church operated in the Maldives during the 20th century, mainly for expatriates. Today, however, 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.” Those expressing religious beliefs other than Islam face imprisonment of up to five years or house arrest, fines up to \$1,300, and deportation. Expatriate Christians are monitored by the authorities. 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

The 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)

The 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 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)

Situation of other religious minorities

There are no recognized religious minorities 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.

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2021](#)): “Non-governmental organizations (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.”



Open Doors in the Maldives

The leaders of the Maldives claim their population is 100% Muslim and take pride in this. Any attempt to convert anyone out of Islam is punishable by imprisonment and/or fines. Therefore, Open Doors calls for increasing prayer support from worldwide Christians for more local believers to come to faith in Christ.

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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
