

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

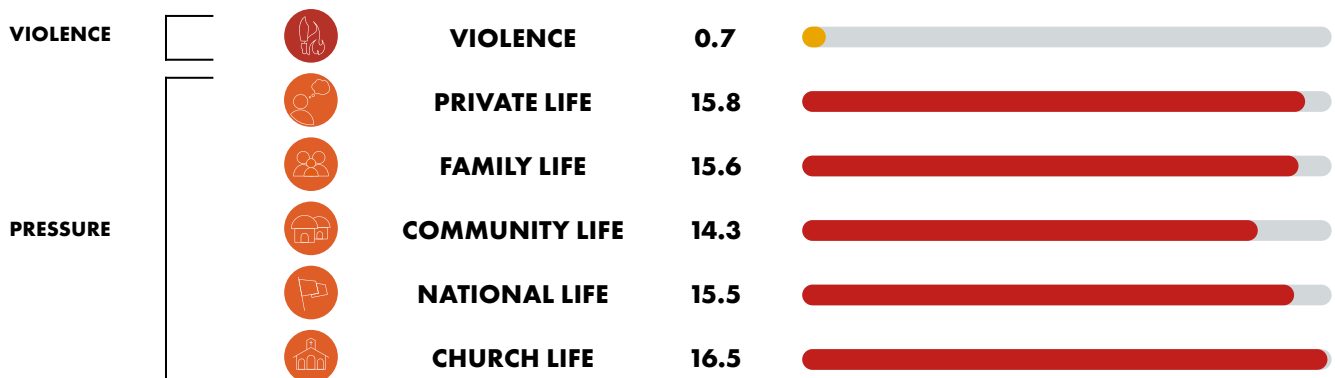
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

MALDIVES

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
19



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 Malé Island. The close-knit communities function as natural watchdogs against religious deviation. Being Maldivian means its citizens are legally required to be Muslim, making conversion to Christianity extremely dangerous and likely to result in being reported to authorities. Besides conservative Islamic attitudes in the general population, the country struggles with radicalized segments of society, including fighters returned from Syria. Armed criminal gangs, often targets for jihadi recruiters, are liable to threaten anyone deemed insufficiently Muslim. No official churches exist in the Maldives. Expatriate Christians, predominantly from India and Sri Lanka working in the tourism sector, are closely monitored, making fellowship very difficult. Internet censorship further isolates believers from accessing Christian resources.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Mohamed Muizzu

POPULATION

515,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Hundreds (Open Doors estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Sunni Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	*	-
Muslims	508,000	98.6
Baha'is	3,700	0.7
Others	3,300	0.7
	Total	100%

Source¹. *For security reasons no numbers can be provided.

In September 2023, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu of the Progressive Party of the Maldives was elected as President, gaining a super-majority in parliament in April 2024. Initially elected on an “India out” campaign that strengthened ties with China, Muizzu has since adopted a more pragmatic approach to India. His administration continues to prioritize the country’s 100% Sunni Muslim identity, with no sign of improving religious freedom conditions. For instance, besides promoting Quranic education, the president announced in April 2025 that a host of new mosque construction projects were underway, alongside the allocation of land for financially self-sustaining Quranic Waqf buildings ([Avas, 3 May 2025](#)).

Since 2021, the government has expanded internet censorship, blocking websites promoting non-Islamic beliefs. The 2021 amendment to the penal code broadened the definition of “criticizing Islam”, forcing expatriates, converts,

and media to practice extreme self-censorship ([US State Department, IRFR 2023 Maldives](#)).

While most Maldivians hold moderate Islamic views, Salafist groups like Jamiyyathul Salaaf have gained influence by arguing that national problems stem from insufficient Islamic orthodoxy. The May 2021 bomb attack against former President Nasheed seemed to confirm the presence of violent extremist cells, many developed through [prison radicalization](#), according to a joint report by Transparency Maldives and the Ministry of Home Affairs (August 2022). However, extremist groups have primarily targeted Christians through social media rather than physical violence.

The Maldives has experienced increasing restrictions on civil liberties, exemplified by the 2017 killing of blogger Yameen Rasheed ([Amnesty International, 23 April 2017](#)) and the 2019 closure of the “Maldives Democracy Network” NGO. Human Rights Watch noted that the government has often yielded to pressure from politicians and Islamist extremist groups rather than protecting free speech rights ([HRW, 14 April 2022](#)).

The legal framework remains restrictive toward women due to Sharia influence. Female converts to Christianity face particular challenges as they cannot legally marry Christian men while still considered Muslims under law. The Maldives maintains the world’s highest divorce rate, partly attributed to men’s extended absences working in tourism and shipping industries, leaving many women financially vulnerable.

¹ Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025 – adapted to incorporate OD-estimate

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

The government positions itself as Islam's protector, with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Ministry of Defense maintaining that apostates cannot be tolerated and religious freedom will never be permitted ([Maldives Independent, 15 April 2018](#)). Islam pervades all areas of society, which means that family and local community members will apply severe pressure on anyone showing even a vague interest in non-Islamic ideas.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Islamic oppression intertwines with Dictatorial paranoia as political parties compete to present themselves as Islam's most faithful defenders. The 2021 penal code amendment expanding the definition of "criticizing Islam" ([US State Department, IRFR 2023](#)) has intensified self-censorship among expatriates, converts and the media, who fear being labeled "anti-Islamic," "irreligious," or "Western agents." This legislation provides authorities with broad powers to target anyone perceived as threatening religious homogeneity.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Corruption remains endemic at all government levels, with officials motivated by bribes, favors, and threats ([The Diplomat, 29 January 2025](#)). Authorities have historically used street gangs to intimidate, vandalize property, and attack political opponents. These criminal gangs are prime recruitment targets for jihadi groups, creating a dangerous nexus between organized crime and religious extremism. As a country expert explained: "Armed criminal gangs are prime targets for jihadi recruiters, and radicalized gangs would target anyone not sufficiently Muslim."

How the situation varies by region

Most 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. Most expatriate Christians can meet for discreet worship (in embassies, for example), provided they do not have contact with local Maldivians or indigenous converts from Islam.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These only exist in the Maldives for expatriates – see above.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts from Islam face the most severe persecution. Officially considered non-existent by the state, Maldivian converts risk losing citizenship if discovered. They must practice their faith in complete secrecy.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These only exist in the Maldives for expatriates – see above.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In the Maldives’ strict Islamic society, female Christian converts must practice their faith in absolute secrecy. If discovered, they risk forced marriage, domestic violence, divorce, or loss of child custody, as families and the state attempt to “restore” them to Islam. Women also face intense pressure to conform to Islamic dress codes, with social ostracism and harassment for non-compliance. In a culture where gender-based violence is often excused within the home, Christian women are highly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, deepening their isolation.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

In the Maldives, male Christian converts must remain secret believers. If discovered, they risk harassment, threats, assault, or government imprisonment, as authorities seek to force conformity to Islam. Although prosecutions are rare, the fear of surveillance and arrest is constant. Families of imprisoned men suffer financial hardship, while children face bullying and stigma at school. Many men choose to flee abroad to preserve their faith, though only those with means can do so. For those who remain, secrecy and pressure define daily life.

Male typical pressure points:

- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	19	79
2025	16	78
2024	18	78
2023	15	77
2022	16	77

In WWL 2026, the overall score rose by 0.8 of a point—primarily due to small increases in pressure over virtually all spheres of life, particularly noticeable in Community Life. This is part of a very gradual upward trend. The Maldivian Constitution does not permit citizens to have any other religion than Islam and no church buildings are allowed. Since coming to power in 2023, President Muizzu’s emphasis on the nation’s Islamic identity has made life more challenging for both native and expatriate Christians. Through new policies in education, finance, law and mosque construction, the state is doing its utmost to keep Sunni Islam visible and central to community life.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no specific details of violence against Christians can be published.

PRIVATE LIFE

Converts hide their faith and conceal any Christian materials to avoid possible imprisonment. Possessing materials in the Dhivehi language is especially dangerous as authorities would suspect they will be used for evangelizing. Any symbols perceived as non-Islamic are promptly removed by officials or community members. Employment contracts for expatriates explicitly state that expressing non-Islamic beliefs can result in imprisonment for up to five years, house arrest, fines ranging from 5,000-20,000 rufiyaa (\$320-\$1,300), and deportation.

FAMILY LIFE

Baptisms and Christian funerals must be conducted in complete secrecy. The Constitution mandates Islamic education, stating in Article 36(c): “Education shall strive to inculcate obedience to Islam.” Children of converts to Christianity are forced to attend Islamic classes. Although children of expatriate Christians are exempt from attending, Islam nevertheless 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. 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 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.

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.” Expatriates are allowed very limited quantities of Christian literature for their personal use, but otherwise importing Christian materials is illegal and those found guilty will be detained and jailed.

In addition, the government has ordered Internet access to websites and social media spreading religions other than Islam to be blocked. This seriously affects converts, in particular.



International obligations & rights violated

The 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](#))

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

Situation of other religious minorities

The Maldives recognizes no religious minorities. All citizens must legally be Muslim. Anyone supporting non-Islamic beliefs (Hinduism, Buddhism, Atheism) faces the same persecution as Christians, leading many to choose exile over imprisonment ([Humanists International](#), 8 October 2020).

Even those deemed “insufficiently Muslim” face threats. The US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Maldives](#)) reports how the government has failed to address online death threats against individuals perceived as critical of Islam.



Open Doors in the Maldives

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



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- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.