

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

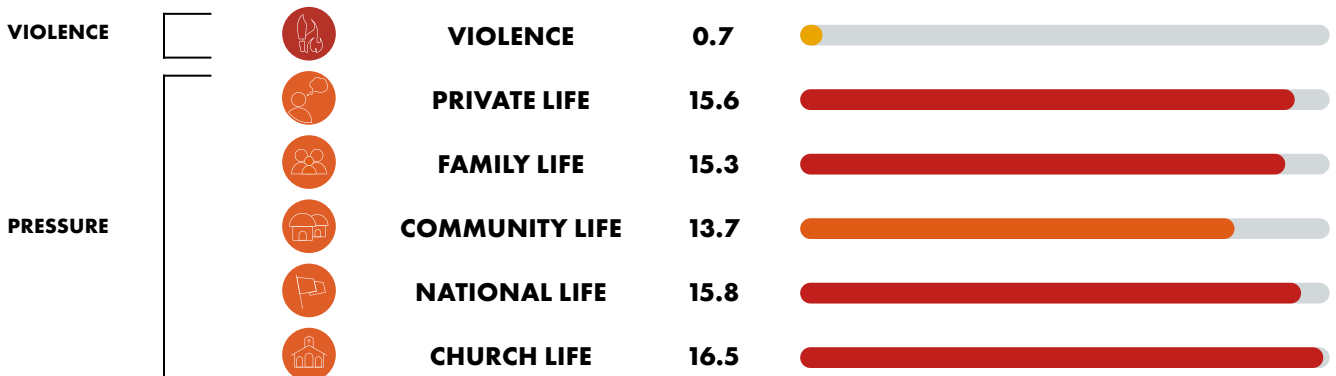
## SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

### MALDIVES

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**16**



#### 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 (which has recovered as the main income source after the pandemic) and coming from India and Sri Lanka, are closely watched as well, making Christian fellowship very difficult.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Mohamed Muizzu

### POPULATION

518,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Hundreds (OD estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	Hundreds	-

According to OD estimate

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 a 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 former rival parties in order to oust President Solih. In September 2023, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu of the Progressive Party of the Maldives was elected as President of the Maldives, gaining a super-majority in parliament in the April 2024 elections. Muizzu was elected on an “India out” campaign and increased the Maldives’ ties with China, but could not escape India’s geographical and economic proximity, settling instead for a more pragmatic relationship between the two countries. His administration is expected to impose further restrictions on religious freedom to promote Islamic unity, potentially leading to increased persecution of Christians.

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. A Human Rights Watch report commented: “The government has often relented to pressure from powerful politicians and religious groups instead of upholding freedom of speech and association. When clerics and social media activists label their critics as *laadheenee* and threaten violence, the government has repeatedly failed to protect rights or prosecute those who carry out attacks” (Human Rights Watch, 24 April 2022).

The [stabbing of three foreign nationals](#) in Malé in February 2020 and the [police raid on Maduvvari island](#) targeting a radical Islamic group in 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. This is also true for the larger group of Christian migrant workers, who mainly serve in the hospitality sector. Expatriate Christians (mainly from India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) do not have any contact with indigenous converts from Islam.

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 financial difficulty for many women.

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

## 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. 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



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	16	78
2024	18	78
2023	15	77
2022	16	77
2021	15	77

*In WWL 2025, the overall score remained the same as in the previous reporting period – 78 points. The level of pressure on Christians continued to be extremely high, and the very low violence score remained under one point. Converts have literally no space at all to live out their Christian faith and expatriate Christians (mostly involved in the tourist industry) lack possibilities for worshipping together without fearing arrest and deportation: No official churches exist. Under the newly elected president (October 2023) and government (April 2024) there have so far been no improvements in the situation of Christians and other religious minorities.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

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## 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. Indeed in March 2024 two tourists were held in custody for ten days for distributing Bible booklets in Dhivehi. The authorities and community members will remove symbols perceived to be anti-Islamic. 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 wear a 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

**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 to the 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.

Even people deemed insufficiently Muslim are at risk of being persecuted. The US State Department IRFR 2023 Maldives states: *“NGOs reported the government continued to fail to take action against online death threats and attacks against persons perceived to be critical of Islam. Threats included calls to implement Sharia penalties for those who criticize Islam and references to persons perceived as criticizing Islam as being “Western agents.” In December, multiple individuals posted numerous threatening messages against a public servant after social media posts claimed the individual had mocked the Prophet Muhammad.”*

# Open Doors in the Maldives

Open Doors provides prayer support for Christians in the Maldives.



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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published 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: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*