

World Watch Research

Maldives: Background Information

September 2024



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Contents

Copyright and sources	1
Map of country	2
Recent history	3
Political and legal landscape	3
Religious landscape.....	5
Economic landscape.....	6
Social and cultural landscape.....	8
Technological landscape	11
Security situation	12
Christian origins	13
Church spectrum today.....	13
Further useful reports.....	13
External Links	13

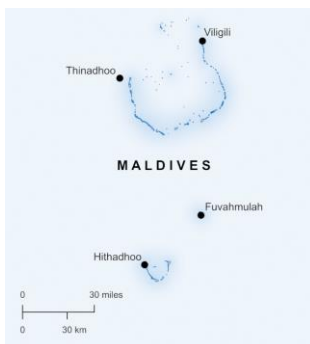
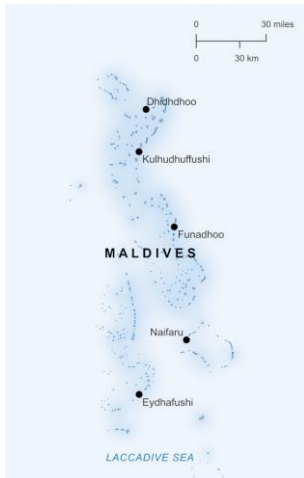
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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Maldives: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
518,000	hundreds	OD estimate

Recent history

The more than 1,000 islands making up the Maldives are a politically divided country. After the ousting of the first democratically elected president, [Mohamed Nasheed](#), in February 2012 (Washington Post, 12 April 2012), his successors frequently reiterated the importance of Islam for the country and their plans to promote the religion. The leaders' intention to protect the country from becoming less than 100% Islamic is the ideological key to understanding the Maldives. Although the surprise presidential victory of opposition politician Ibrahim Solih in September 2018 did not change this goal, it definitely changed the way the government communicated. It also brought back former President Mohamed Nasheed, who has been made Speaker of the parliament. On 6 May 2021, a [bomb attack](#) close to his house seriously wounded him (more on this below, see: *Political and legal landscape*), reminding everyone how violent Maldivian politics can be (AP News, 7 May 2021). Former President Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom, in the political opposition facing Solih, was banned from running in the 2023 elections by court but continued to attack the government with a fierce anti-India campaign, adding to an already politically volatile situation.

President Solih's government took on a style of communication which differed starkly from the previous administration's and wanted to appear to be more open; however, when the need was there, it did not hesitate to brush up on its Islamic credentials, as the surprising and quick closing of the NGO "Maldives Democracy Network" in November 2019 showed. Likewise, President Solih confirmed that the [protection of "religion unity"](#) would remain a top priority under his government (Sun Maldives, 11 November 2020). Two further examples of this were: i) A bill aiming to [stop the mockery of religion](#) (i.e., of Islam), which was discussed in August 2021 in parliament (Sun MV, 24 August 2021), and ii) The order to [block webpages](#) promoting any religion other than Islam (The Times of Addu, 30 November 2021).

In 2023, Speaker of Parliament and former President Mohamed Nasheed turned against his former ally, President Solih, and formed his own party (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). In a surprising outcome at the end of October 2023, voters in the Maldives elected a [new president](#) in the second round of elections: Malé mayor Mohamed Muizzu, thus ending Mohamed Solih's time in office (BBC News, 30 September 2023). The 21 April 2024 parliamentary elections saw a [landslide victory](#) for the party of President Muizzu and his allies, securing at least 70 of the 93 seats (The Diplomat, 23 April 2024). Provided he can preserve unity within his party and among allies, the Maldives may see a number of policy changes.

Even though the new political leadership of the country shows less *Dictatorial paranoia* than the one before, there is little doubt it would jump into action should Christians be perceived as a threat or even a blemish to the nation.

Political and legal landscape

Politics in the Maldives always carries religious undertones; it would seem that Islam has to be defended or promoted in every possible way. As politics are often family business, rifts, changing coalitions and surprise political moves are quite usual, as was shown in 2023 when Speaker of parliament and former President Mohamed Nasheed [joined forces](#) with the Progressive Alliance, an alliance including the PPM of former President Yameen Abdul Gayoom. However, all political maneuvering was in vain, when former mayor of Malé, Mohammed Muizzu, was elected president in

the September 2023 elections. He ran on a brief, three-week campaign, [took](#) 46% of the vote, leaving the favorite, incumbent President Solih, trailing with 39% (Associated Press, 9 September 2023). In the second round, Muizzu beat Solih with a relatively comfortable 54% and gained a super-majority in parliament in the April 2024 elections. As a consequence, the [pro-China tilt](#) of the Maldives may become more pronounced, worrying India (The Diplomat, 29 April 2024). His administration is expected to impose further restrictions on religious freedom to promote Islamic unity, but potentially leading to increased persecution of Christians. The government has taken steps to criminalize the "India Out" campaign, block webpages promoting religions other than Islam, and impose strict restrictions on Israelis entering the country. These actions effectively cut off access to information and resources for the Christian community, forcing them to practice their faith in complete secrecy.

In recent years, it has not been unusual for a minister to lose his job for a variety of reasons, including alleged treason. This points to another issue which Maldivian politics is facing - the paranoia of its leaders, no matter who is ruling. Staying in power seems to be a high priority, for which all means are used. As a result, the Maldives has become a land in turmoil (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), the closing of the NGO "Maldives Democracy Network" in November 2019 and the suspension of English-language news site "Maldives Independent" at the end of January 2020, although the latter was not due to government action. Given that the government's goal of protecting Islam has always remained unchanged, it is plain that the situation for religious minorities, especially Christians, remains difficult. Indeed, the small Christian minority has virtually no room to breathe under such pressure.

Former President Nasheed returned to the country from his London exile in 2019, after his party won an overwhelming election victory. On 6 May 2021, a bomb outside his home exploded as he stepped into his car. The 53 year-old suffered serious injury and had to undergo emergency surgery in Germany. While the motives for the attack have remained unclear, Nasheed had always been very outspoken against radical Islamic groups in the Maldives. Both former President Mohamed Nasheed and police investigators concluded that [Islamist groups](#) were behind the bomb attack targeting him at his home (Associated Press, 26 July 2021). In 2023, Nasheed left the ruling MDP and led a splinter group called "The Democrats". This was a risky move that did not pay off. For the time-being, he seems to have withdrawn from public political life and serves as Secretary-General of the "[Climate Vulnerable Forum](#)" (CVF website, accessed 24 June 2024).

Another challenge the government has to face is fierce opposition from former President Gayoom. He chose to lash out at Solih's government for virtually acting as 'slaves' of India, a statement which highlights the situation many small countries in Asia face: They have to navigate their position between the Asian giants India and China. Under Gayoom's rule, the choice had been for China. That changed under Solih: India and the Maldivian government proceeded with plans to open an [Indian consulate](#) in the southernmost atoll in Addu (The Interpreter, 29 March 2022). The government's decision at that time to [ban](#) any "India Out" protests led to increased opposition, even within President Solih's own MDP. The government submitted a bill seeking to criminalize the "India Out" campaign as damaging the country's diplomatic interests, a move that was decried by the opposition as being against freedom of expression (The Diplomat, 11 May 2022). In contrast, new President Muizzu ran with the promise

to end the "military presence of India" in the Maldives, which turned out to be a popular demand and, at the time of writing, he seems to have delivered on his promise. While it has to be seen how far he plans to distance his country from its big neighbor, geography suggests that the Maldives will still need to follow a carefully balanced approach when dealing with India and China in the future.

Gender perspective

The legal framework of the Maldives remains restrictive towards women and girls, primarily due to the influence of Sharia law. Whilst it ratified the CEDAW convention in 1993, the Maldives maintained a [reservation to Article 16](#) which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage (UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, 28 October 2019). 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. Furthermore, pathways to divorce are less accessible for women, which restricts opportunities to escape abusive marriages. In a 2019 CEDAW periodic report, it was observed that the Maldivian government developed legal frameworks to align with obligations under CEDAW, such as the Gender Equality Act (2016) and the Sexual Offences Act (2014). However, the government was [criticized](#) for wanting to appeal to a women's rights narrative whilst doing little to effect actual change (DevEx, 6 April 2018). The government in response has since [launched](#) the five-year Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) to ensure the effective enforcement of the law (UNDP, 23 March 2022).

Religious landscape

Maldives: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	hundreds	-

According to OD-estimate

The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians is "hundreds". The country is officially 100% Sunni Muslim and any Maldivian citizen wanting to turn away from Islam will lose his or her citizenship. Among the many expatriate workers, there are Christians (as well as Hindus), but if they dare to meet at all, they have to be very cautious and inconspicuous.

The language of the Maldives is Dhivehi: The complete Bible in this language is not yet available.

In the 12th century, Sunni Muslim traders brought Islam to the Maldives which had been a Buddhist country for centuries. The one-time strong Sufi tradition is declining as the influence of Saudi Wahhabism grows, despite a cooling of relations with Saudi Arabia in 2017 when the government announced a massive Saudi investment in the country prematurely, thus angering the Saudi king. The investment never came to pass, but influences from Wahhabism and also Salafism have poured into the Maldives nevertheless, not least through the Internet.

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.

COVID-19 changed the religious landscape at least temporarily insofar as many Christians working in the hospitality sector lost their jobs and returned to their homes, predominantly in other South Asian

countries. Many of them have returned now, since the country has [opened up again for tourism](#) (Ministry of Tourism, 29 December 2022) and is increasingly on the way back to normal business.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Maldives](#), update as of 13 March 2024:

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 18,847. The most important economic sectors are tourism and agriculture (mainly fishing and coconuts), sand mining has become another business.
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 5.4% of the population live below the national poverty line, people in multidimensional poverty count for 0.8%, people vulnerable to it for 4.8%.
- **Remittances:** 0.1%
- As around 80% of the country is one meter or less below sea level, the Maldives is concerned about the effects of global warming.

According to [World Bank Maldives data](#), accessed 24 June 2024:

- Maldives is categorized as an upper-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita (current USD):** 12,667.4 (2023 billion).
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 4.0 (2023).
- **Inflation, consumer prices (annual %):** 2.3 (2022)

The Maldives was hit very hard by the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic since the economy is mainly dependent on tourism and many expatriate workers are employed in this sector, reflected in the strong ups and downs in GDP per capita growth in the period 2020 to 2022. Statistics are however, far from certain. Whereas the UN population estimate for 2024 is 518,000, the [CIA World Factbook Maldives](#) gives a far lower number (388,858 - most likely due to many expatriate workers leaving the country). The [World Bank estimate](#) is highest of all at 521,021 (2023). This uncertainty lives on in the highly political question: 'How many migrants are there working in the Maldives?' The Maldives Bureau of Statistics answered this in May 2024, stating that [more than 130,000 migrant workers](#) were employed in the Maldives as of end of March 2021. 46% come from Bangladesh, with India (29%) and Sri Lanka (10%) a distant second and third respectively (Statistics Maldives, International Labor Day, 1 May 2024).

According to the official [Census 2022](#), the total resident working-age population of Maldives is 411,219. This includes 281,131 resident Maldivians and 130,088 as resident foreigners. However, the immigration office [announced](#) in January 2019 that there were approximately 63,000 illegal residents, most of them employed in the tourist sector (Maldives Independent, 17 January 2019), so this number also has to be added to the official number of migrant workers. The government conducts frequent [raids](#) and documented 13,000 migrants workers and had deported another 24,000 by mid-2023 (Sun MV, 2 July 2023). Given such figures, it is not surprising that human trafficking [the illegal supply of migrant workers] is the second most lucrative economic sector after tourism. Corruption poses another challenge for the economy. However, in Transparency International's CPI 2023 the Maldives is now ranked 93rd out of 180 countries (with a score of 39/100 points), which is a stagnation after having previously improved considerably.

Quoting the [World Bank's Maldives overview](#) (last updated 4 October 2023):

- "Maldives, a country of around 550,000 people dispersed across 185 islands, is an upper-middle-income country with a robust growth trajectory. The economy has maintained its strong growth momentum in 2023 due to rising tourist arrivals, and, with rising tourist arrivals, is expected to maintain a strong growth and poverty reduction trajectory. Overall, sustained growth performance in the last decade has significantly reduced poverty, and Maldives performs well on poverty outcomes compared to its regional, income, and small island peers. The economy is heavily dependent on tourism which has been the main driver of economic growth in Maldives and the dependence on tourism makes the country highly vulnerable to macroeconomic and external shocks. Commodity price volatility is exerting pressure on external and fiscal balances, through costlier imports and higher subsidies. In addition, existing high debt stock of the public sector, elevated levels of spending the government's aim to undertake sizeable infrastructure investments through external non-concessional borrowing, and the presence of blanket subsidies for major consumption items have led Maldives to be exposed to elevated fiscal vulnerabilities. Public debt is expected to remain high, warranting continued efforts to reduce fiscal deficits, including comprehensive subsidy and public investment management reforms while mitigating impacts on the vulnerable."
- "Tourism, which accounts for almost one-third of the economy, has maintained its robust growth performance in the first half of 2023. Despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine, arrivals from Russia remain strong. An earlier-than-expected reopening of the Chinese market in January has compensated for fewer tourists from India and Gulf countries, while arrivals from Europe remained high. This supported employment opportunities, which are particularly important for the poorest. However, heavy reliance on tourism and limited sectoral diversification remain key structural challenges as Maldives is highly vulnerable to macroeconomic shocks."

Providing more data on the Maldives' dependence on tourism and the risk of external shocks, the [World Bank's Maldives Development Update](#) from May 2024 states:

"In 2023, the number of tourist arrivals reached a record-breaking figure of 1.88 million. Nevertheless, this did not result in higher GDP growth due to lower per-tourist spending and shorter stays. The Maldivian economy is estimated to have grown by 4% in 2023. Domestic inflation, at 2.9% in 2023, remained higher than the historical average of 0.5%. Price increases were experienced in the food, education, restaurant, and lodging services sectors. Food inflation could increase poverty by 0.4 percentage points, with atolls experiencing even higher rates. Travel export receipts fell 6.8%, while merchandise imports remained elevated at \$3.5 billion. This resulted in a current account deficit of 23.4% of GDP. High import costs and external debt repayments also weighed heavily on gross reserves, which fell to \$551.1 million in January 2024."

"Tourism, which accounts for a quarter of the Maldives' economy, has experienced slower growth in 2023 due to a decline in average duration of stay and lower tourist spending. This slowdown has exposed underlying economic vulnerabilities in the Maldives. These vulnerabilities stem from persistent large current account and fiscal deficits. The country relies heavily on imports while having limited official reserves, creating an unsustainable imbalance. Government support for struggling state-owned enterprises (SOEs), along with blanket subsidies, high capital spending, and a public health program, further exacerbate these pressures."

"While these subsidies and in-kind transfers are crucial for boosting household incomes, their unsustainable nature raises concerns. When fiscal pressures mount, the Maldivian people's well-being could be negatively impacted. Additionally, infrastructure projects, although promising long-term growth, were financed through non-concessional external borrowing and sovereign guarantees. The rising cost of borrowing abroad has forced the government to turn towards domestic sources, increasing the domestic financial sector's vulnerability to government debt. The government recently announced its commitment to a fiscal reform agenda to address these economic vulnerabilities. This agenda includes reforms to subsidies, SOEs, the public health insurance scheme (Aasandha), and reprioritizing capital spending. These reforms offer a path towards a more resilient Maldivian economy."

In June 2023, the United Kingdom announced the start of negotiations for a [Free Trade Agreement](#) (FTA) with the Maldives, which is one of the few members of the Commonwealth with whom the UK has not yet had a FTA (Sun MV, 8 June 2023). However, this is a long-term endeavor and the status of progress is unclear.

The [return of Islamic militants](#) from abroad, especially from Syria, often regarded as heroes in Maldivian society, may endanger the tourist business (Maldives Independent, 17 December 2019). In normal times, the news in February 2020 that a stabbing attack had wounded three foreign nationals and that in April 2020 the Islamic State group (IS) claimed its [first attack](#) on the Maldives by burning five government-owned boats would have been highly worrying for the country's economy (Long War Journal, 16 April 2020). However, with the COVID-19 crisis, this hardly made headlines beyond the region. According to CNN Travel (16 July 2020), tourism accounts altogether for [two thirds](#) of the Maldives' GDP.

Christians (many of whom work in the hospitality sector) are also slowly recovering from the economic shock, and it will take a long time with people facing a lot of insecurity and changes. Religious minorities (such as Christians) could easily be used as scapegoats for all kinds of woes, including unemployment. This means they need to be even more cautious than before COVID-19 struck.

Gender perspective

The Maldives has fallen in rank on the [UNDP's Gender Inequality Index](#) over the past decade, dropping from 49th in 2014 to 83rd in 2021, which is partly due to low female representation in parliament and a low women's labor force participation rate due to gender bias. Furthermore, under Sharia rules of inheritance, which govern private estate inheritance in the Maldives, daughters inherit half that of a son. This is based on the premise that men bear the responsibility of financially supporting a household financially while women are not required to do so. In light of these economic vulnerabilities, women are often economically dependent on men.

Social and cultural landscape

According to [World Factbook Maldives](#) and [UNDP HDR Maldives](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The Maldives shows a mixture of Sinhalese, Dravidian, Arab, Australasian, and African descent, ethnicities play no major role in the country.
- **Main languages:** Dhivehi is the main language, a dialect related to Sinhala, but the script is derived from Arabic. Most government officials speak English as well.

- **Urbanization rate:** 42% with most of it concentrated in the capital Malé, which is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Approximately one third of the total population lives there.
- **Literacy rate:** 97.9% (age 15 and higher)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 7.8. Whilst boys and girls attend primary schools at an equal rate, more boys go on to attend secondary and tertiary education than girls, according to [Borgen Project](#), reporting on 28 June 2018.
- **Health and education indicators:** There are 20.5 physicians and 43 hospital beds available per 10,000 people. The student teacher ration in primary school is 10:1.

According to the [World Bank country profile](#) (2021):

- **Population/Age distribution:** 22% of the population are under 14; 4.8% are above 65.
- **Education:** The gross school enrollment rate for primary school is 98% (2022), the primary school completion rate is 92%.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 4.2%, the percentage of people in vulnerable employment is 19% (modeled ILO estimate).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** There is only a very small number of IDP/Refugees in the country, but the number of legal migrant workers is estimated at 1/3 of the whole population and 63,000 undocumented in an [IOM](#) country profile published in 2019.

According to [UNDP HDR Maldives](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.762, the Maldives rank 87th out of 193 countries.
- **Life expectancy:** 80.8 years
- **Median age:** 31.9 years
- **GINI coefficient:** 31.3
- **Gender inequality:** In the Gender Inequality Index, the Maldives score 0.328 and rank 76th of 166 countries.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 6.1% and 19.5% of the population are in vulnerable employment. The rate of unemployed youth is 16.8%, the rate of youth neither in school nor employment is 21.9% (between 15 and 24 years of age)

Maldivian society is Islamic and comparably young, with a median age of 31.9 years. The Maldives are facing serious social problems, such as drug addiction, cases of sexual abuse and high divorce rates without being able to find solutions. Reportedly, drug addiction is also a problem among some of the few Christians in the country.

An unpublished 2009 study on violence against children - possibly not published due to its grim findings – states that one in seven children of secondary school age in the country has been sexually abused at some time in their lives. It also discovered that the rate of sexual abuse for girls is almost twice as high (20%) compared to that of boys (11%). Girls are particularly at risk in the capital, Malé. The study also revealed that 47% of Maldivian children under the age of 18 have undergone physical or emotional punishment at home, school or in the community. It is also more common among students attending secondary school in the atolls, with one in four reporting they had been hit by adults or other children during the past year. The figure for Malé was 14%. More recent reports are not available but the problem is officially recognized. The Ministry for Family and Children, for instance,

[reported](#) higher child abuse numbers in November 2017 and the mayor of the capital Malé decried the increasing crime in his city (Maldives Independent, 16 November 2017).

The Maldives has the highest divorce rate in the world. [World Population Review](#) (accessed 24 June 2024) tries to provide some background:

"According to data from the United Nations and other sources, the country with the highest divorce rate in the world in 2020 was the Maldives, which recorded 2984 divorces against a population of 540,544, resulting in a divorce rate of 5.52 per 1000 people. This is actually a notable step down from the country's widely publicized rate of 10.97 in 2002, which earned the country a Guinness World Record. Why are divorces so frequent in the Maldives? One common explanation is that the island nation's citizens frown upon physical relations outside of marriage, but both marriages and divorces are quite easy to obtain, so they marry quickly and divorce with minimal complication if the relationship fails. What's more, a cultural shift is currently taking place in the Maldives, with women becoming more empowered and more able to fend for themselves financially, enabling them to leave marriages that aren't working."

An additional explanation is 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. Given the small size of the country and with many islands basically being micro-societies in themselves, the number of youth out of school and employment is worryingly high. A good example for these microcosms has been the situation on [Maduvvari island](#), where a group of radical Muslims was able to deprive women and children of healthcare and conduct child marriages, going against national laws (Associated Press, 20 December 2019). Another example for the social problems is a continued high level of gang violence, which regularly produces [victims](#) (The Edition Maldives, 9 February 2021). The [amalgam](#) of political power brokers, religious radicals and gang violence has been highlighted in a 2023 publication, explaining how these are interacting with and benefitting from each other (The Diplomat, 4 December 2023).

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.

Gender perspective

In the Maldives, men legally practice polygamy, which can create complex family dynamics and potential conflicts. Women face significant discrimination and violence, and pathways to divorce are less accessible for them. The government's five-year Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) aims to improve law enforcement, but divorce laws still favor men, often leaving women and children in precarious situations. A country expert explains: "Christian women in interfaith marriages are particularly vulnerable to forced conversions, domestic abuse, and exploitation. Christian families face severe challenges in maintaining their faith due to social and legal restrictions, risking custody of their children if their Christian faith is discovered, as children are automatically considered Muslim under Maldivian law."

Under traditional societal norms, women are expected to assume responsibility for household management, with men assuming the role of financial provider and decision maker. In a [2019 Periodic](#)

[Report](#) submitted by the Maldives to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, it was observed that negative gender norms continue to harm both boys and girls (UN, 2019). Whilst women enjoy relative freedom in the public sphere through health and education, social conservatism remains the norm in the private sphere, where Sharia law is more likely to be adhered to. Gender-based violence is widely accepted within Maldivian culture and domestic violence – [considered a private matter](#) – is usually unreported by victims (Equality Now, 24 November 2021). Domestic violence levels reportedly [increased](#) during the COVID-19 lockdown, with government support services unable to provide sufficient support to victims (OHCHR, March 2021, p.2). Instances of rape and sexual harassment are relatively common in the Maldives. A [quarter of women](#) have reportedly experienced some form of violence in their lifetime (World Bank blog, 11 December 2020). According to the Human Rights Watch group, gender-based violence is ‘endemic’ in the Maldives, and is exacerbated by rising Islamist extremism which has [increased harassment](#) both online and in the public sphere (HRW 2021 Maldives country chapter). This was not mentioned in the [HRW 2023](#) and [HRW 2024](#) Maldives country chapter.

Technological landscape

According to DataReportal [Digital 2024: The Maldives](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 83.9% penetration rate
- **Social media usage:** 69.9% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 158.5% of the total population

In South Asia, according to the Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023, there is a gender gap in mobile phone ownership of [15%](#) (GSMA, 2023). This gap is significantly less in the Maldives, however, at just [1%](#) in the urban areas and 2% in the rural areas (BMJ, March 2020). This indicates that men and women have similar levels of access to technology.

The Maldives are challenged by their geographical situation, consisting of a high number of atolls spread over a wide area in the Indian Ocean. It should also be kept in mind that there is a wide gap between resort islands for tourists (with unhindered Internet access and all the technological niceties of global life) and residential islands where the indigenous population lives. Therefore, all such statistics should be viewed with caution.

In terms of press freedom, the Maldives jumped to #72 in the World Press Freedom Index 2020, up from #120 three years before. While this was an encouraging sign, much remains to be done, especially in the protection of journalists and also in [holding responsible](#) perpetrators of intimidation and (previously even murder) of journalists, referred to above in Political and legal landscape (Human Rights Watch, 21 April 2021). In the latest edition ([World Press Freedom 2024 Maldives](#)), the country slipped back to #106 with an overall score of 52.36/100 points. Thus, the improvement seems to have been very temporary.

As the number of Internet users increases, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources. As long as government intervention remains low, this is likely to strengthen isolated members of the Christian community. However, according to The Times of Addu (reporting on 30 November 2021) [serious restrictions](#) came into force in November 2021:

- "The Criminal Court of Maldives on Tuesday [30 November 2021] gave 72 hours to the Maldives Police Service to shutdown all internet mediums used to promote religions other than Islamic in the national Dhivehi. The statement by Maldives Police service read that internet content promoting religions other than Islam to Maldivians including social media pages, YouTube channels and other applications have been ordered to be blocked in the Maldives by the Criminal Court. With this, the Maldives Police Service has sent notice to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block all such media within 72 hours and send confirmation to the police. The order was made under the Religious Unity Act (Act No. 6/94) which prohibits the practice by citizens of any religion other than Islam."

Security situation

What was stated in the WWL 2021 Full Country Dossier for the Maldives remains relevant: A country observer once referred to the situation in the Maldives as "[losing a tourist paradise to terrorism](#)" (Jamestown, 22 January 2016). This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives did have one of the highest per capita rates of Islamic militants fighting abroad, a Maldives Independent report from December 2019 spoke of [1400 militants](#) in action. The challenge is how best to re-integrate them on their return from fighting in Syria. Connected with this, [two additional challenges](#) arise (Jamestown, 25 March 2019): One is that it is completely unclear what to expect from widows and children of *shahids* (Islamic militants killed in Iraq and Syria) returning to the Maldives. The authorities do not know how to deal with them, although they are cracking down on violent militants. The other challenge is that Islamic militants who have returned have been acquitted in court due to lack of proof that they were actually involved in fighting after 2015, the time when a law penalizing fighting in a foreign war came into force. Those men are free and are regarded by many Maldivians as being true Islamic heroes.

In September 2019, the government placed [17 organizations](#) on a list under the Anti-Terrorism Act (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2 December 2019). While the attack against Parliament Speaker Mohamed Nasheed has to be mentioned here, it is not clear if it is related to radical elements within the country's Islamic society, so while it is correct to speak of "an [ominous rise of intolerant Islam](#)" in the Maldives, it may be premature to connect it with this particular bomb attack (The Economist, 15 May 2021).

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 not just trying to keep the country 100% Islamic, but is also struggling with emerging violent militancy. Another stark reminder of this reality was the arrest of 14 members of a militant group allied with the Islamic State group (IS) for an alleged [bomb plot](#) they planned to carry out in the archipelago (Washington Post, 15 November 2022). This in turn shows that the Christian minority has to be very cautious and cannot dare to show in public its presence as a Christian community.

The threat of returning Islamic militants has been clearly outlined in a report entitled "[Prison Radicalization in the Maldives](#)", which was joint-published by Transparency Maldives and the Ministry of Home Affairs in August 2022. Unlike previous governments, President Ibrahim Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) no longer wished to turn a blind eye to the [threat](#) of Islamic extremists in his

country (Lowy Institute, 7 October 2022). According to the report published in 2022, there were around 50 surviving Maldivian women and children detained in camps in northeast Syria, which the president was seeking to repatriate. They were all that remained of the Maldivian men and women who had been lured by hollow promises to fight for jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria. As stated in [EFSAS, 20 April 2022](#):

- "In December 2019, the Commissioner of Police, Mohamed Hameed, disclosed that there could be up to 1,400 Islamist extremists in the Maldives who adhere to ISIS ideology. Moreover, he revealed that 423 citizens had attempted to travel to warzones in Iraq and Syria and 173 had succeeded. Further underlying conditions, such as poverty, unemployment and crime, may also have contributed to the vulnerability of Maldivian youth, exploited by the narratives of recruiters."

These are significant numbers considering the population is little over 500,000. The Maldives have since begun looking for [security](#) (and other) partnerships within the region and beyond (The Interpreter, 4 July 2023). The interdependency of political power brokers, religious radicals and gangs has already been highlighted (see above: *Social and cultural landscape*).

So far, Christians have not been a particular target for Islamic militants, but this is more due to them keeping a low profile than for not being considered a target worthy of attack. Should Christians become more visible or should Maldivians be exposed or just accused of being Christian, this may quickly change.

Christian origins

This is officially a 100% Sunni Muslim country. In the interest of security no information about the Christian presence can be published.

Church spectrum today

Due to security issues, no WCD breakdown can be published.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Maldives>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

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