

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

MALDIVES

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Maldives	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	78	14
WWL 2018	78	13
WWL 2017	76	13
WWL 2016	76	13
WWL 2015	78	11

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Maldives

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12651486>

Recent country history

The Maldives are a politically divided country. After the ousting of the first democratically elected president, [Mohamed Nasheed](#), in February 2012, his successors have frequently reiterated the importance of Islam for the country and their plans to promote the religion. Opposition forces (or simply those perceived as a danger to the rulers) have been driven out of the country or arrested and some founded a United Maldives Opposition in May 2016, headed by Nasheed who was granted asylum in the UK. The leaders' intention to protect the country from becoming less than 100% Islam is the ideological key for understanding the Maldives. This goal has been re-emphasized in various ways and countless times in the WWL 2019 reporting period. It is unlikely that the surprise victory of opposition politician Ibrahim Solih in September 2018 will change anything concerning this goal.

The religious landscape

The country is 100% Sunni Muslim and each Maldivian citizen wanting to turn away from it will lose his or her citizenship. Among the many expatriate workers, there are Christians as well, but if they dare to meet at all, they have to be very cautious and inconspicuous.

The political 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 moves are quite normal. Especially 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 Maldivian politics is having to face - the paranoia of its leaders. Staying in power seems to be the overarching goal and every means is used to do that. This was shown again in the presidential election campaign, which was fought as a battle against all opposition - real or perceived. The small Christian minority has virtually no room to breathe under such pressure. It is unlikely that the new leader, Ibrahim Salih, elected in September 2018, will break with this rule.

The socio-economic landscape

For years now, the Maldives have been 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 discovered 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.

The Maldives has the highest divorce rate in the world, with a nine out of ten ratio – some Maldivians have allegedly “tied the knot” sixty times! Following Islamic custom, a husband can divorce his wife by simply saying “I divorce you!” three times. 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.

According to official [figures](#) reported by the Department of Immigration in June 2015, the Maldives are home to 124,000 migrant workers, most of them employed in the tourist sector. In relation to the number of inhabitants of the Maldives, an estimated 358,000 people in 2015, this is a surprisingly high number. Even more so as Transparency Maldives, a local NGO, estimates that the real number of migrant workers is closer to 200,000. Given these figures, it is not surprising that human trafficking [the illegal supply of migrant workers] is the second most lucrative economic sector after tourism, according to official government figures from 2011. The country depends very much on tourism and although the government's targets for 2017 were not reached, the number of tourists recently saw an [increase](#) despite all travel warnings.

Concluding remarks

The 2018 presidential election campaign damaged both Maldives' domestic cohesion and its international reputation. The blatant ignorance of the basic principle of rule of law (see Context below) showed that the rulers are not interested in any democratic process, but are simply focused on staying in power and in protecting Islam. Additionally, the fight against violent Islamic radicals has to continue and the government is well aware of this danger. One observer referred to the Maldives as [“a Paradise lost to terrorism”](#). This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives do have one of the highest per capita rate of Islamic militants fighting abroad.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Maldives

1. Recent country history: Mohamed Nasheed
http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/mohamed-nasheed-talks-about-the-island-president-keeping-fragile-democracy-afloat/2012/04/12/gIQUZvCFT_story.html
2. The socio-economic landscape: reported
<http://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/rise-in-child-abuse-reports-134234>
3. The socio-economic landscape: figures
[http://minivannews.com/politics/more-than-124000-migrant-workers-in-the-maldives-99112?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+minivannews%2FrStS+\(Minivan+News\)](http://minivannews.com/politics/more-than-124000-migrant-workers-in-the-maldives-99112?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+minivannews%2FrStS+(Minivan+News))
4. The socio-economic landscape: increase
<http://maldivesindependent.com/business/tourist-numbers-jump-18-5-percent-in-march-137539>
5. Concluding remarks: “a Paradise lost to terrorism”
[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=45009&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=26&cHash=58349b6fb2aac945e6e3fc34f8bff85d](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=45009&tx_ttnews[backPid]=26&cHash=58349b6fb2aac945e6e3fc34f8bff85d)

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
444,000	a few thousand	-

Source: *Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2018.*

How did Christians get there?

This is officially a 100% Sunni Muslim country. In the interest of security no information can be published in this section.

What church networks exist today?

In the interest of security there is no information available for this section.

Religious context

WCD 2018 estimates the Muslim population at 98.6%.

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 to Saudi Arabia in 2017 when the government announced a massive Saudi investment in Maldives prematurely, thus angering the Saudi King. According to the government authorities, the Maldives nation is officially 100% Sunni Muslim and all Maldivian citizens have to be Muslim. The language of the Maldives is Dhivehi: The complete Bible in this language is not yet available.

Notes on the current situation

Normal church life (i.e. worshipping together, fellowship, youth work, outreach) is all impossible for Maldivian believers. The few hidden Christians often struggle with drug addiction and other social problems, which are common in Maldivian society. Importing Christian literature is officially forbidden. Reportedly even tourists have sometimes got into difficulties for just taking their own personal copy of the Bible with them. When entering the Maldives, tourists have to fill in a form asking if they are bringing to the Maldives “goods that are prohibited or subject to restriction such as religious material”. Expatriate Christians are also very cautious in worshipping and frequently desist from meeting in groups.

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

The Maldives scored 78 points in WWL 2019 (the same number as in WWL 2018) and is to be found at rank 14.

What type of persecution dominates?

Islamic oppression: The Islamic government perceives itself as the protector of Islam. To be Maldivian is equated with being a Muslim, and a convert will face harsh consequences including losing citizenship. Officially there are no Maldivian Christians, only expatriate Christians.

Dictatorial paranoia: President Yameen announced a program to promote Islamic unity in the population, indicating that the authorities will oppose any perceived deviation from their understanding of Islam.

Organized corruption and crime: Many street gangs are controlled by the authorities (at all levels) and target anyone who speaks out against the government or against strict Islam. Radical Islamic groups that want to ferret out Christians and atheists also have connections and influence with gangs and corrupt or brutal police networks.

Who is driving persecution?

The government insists that the country has to be run according to conservative Islamic tenets. Religious freedom does not exist, but expatriate Christians are allowed to practice their faith in the utmost privacy – a strictly monitored activity. Radical Islamic preachers are exerting strong socio-religious control and are influencing others with their radical views of Islam, making it impossible for Christians (especially converts) to show anything of their Christian faith due to fear of being monitored and handed over to the government authorities.

What it results in

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 its members, which naturally includes religious choice. Conversion to Christianity can thus easily 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 closely watched as well, making Christian fellowship very difficult.

Violence

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

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

Due to security issues and the small size of the Christian community living in the Maldives, examples cannot be published.

In a country where according to Article 9(d) of the Constitution non-Muslims may not become a citizen of the Maldives and accordingly, if someone is found to have converted to Christianity, will be stripped of his or her citizenship as well punished for violating Sharia law, it is not hard to imagine that pressure is extremely high and converts remain well hidden. Some Maldivian Christians have preferred to leave the islands and stay abroad due to the enormous pressure they were put under.

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

In WWL 2019, the level of pressure on Christians remained more or less unchanged, reflected in the very high score of 78 points (which was the same score as in WWL 2018) and puts the Maldives at rank 14. 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 *Church sphere* continues to receive maximum points. The new government, which only took over in mid-November 2018 and is therefore outside the WWL 2019 reporting period, is unlikely to bring any improvement as regards freedom of religion.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Maldives	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The Islamic government sees itself as the protector of Islam, instituting a set of laws that basically prohibits a Maldivian from leaving Islam and converting to another religion. To be Maldivian is equated with being a Muslim, leaving no room for any deviation, and a convert will face harsh consequences including losing citizenship. Officially there are no Maldivian Christians, only expatriate Christians. The growing Islamization was illustrated in the WWL 2019 reporting period when the Ministry of Islamic Affairs published a policy paper in April 2018 dealing (among other topics) with the question of [apostates](#). Of course, the government states in this paper that it can never tolerate apostasy. Around the same time, the Minister of Defense stated in all due clarity that he will [never allow freedom of religion](#) in the Maldives since it is a "country with moderate Islamic values". This reflects the difficult situation the Christian minority in the Maldives finds itself in.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

Political freedoms are severely limited, if granted at all. While on campaign trail for re-election, President Yameen accused international pressure and opposition forces of attempting to make the Maldives less than [100% Islamic](#). Freedom of religion is restricted still further since the "protection of religion" is purely understood to mean the protection of Islam. The protection against destroying

“religious unity” is also worrying, as this wording indicates that the authorities will oppose any perceived deviation from their understanding of Islam. All these laws and rhetoric not only show that Islam will be protected at all costs, but also reflects how *Islamic oppression* is blended with *Dictatorial paranoia*, because Islam is being used as a justification for limiting political freedom. (For further details on the political developments see "Context" below.)

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

Corruption is rampant from the highest levels of government on down. Almost anything can be accomplished through sufficient bribes, favors and/or threats. Contracts and other agreements can be broken at whim and government officials hire street-gang youth to do dirty work for them (e.g. roughing people up, committing property crimes against designated targets, selling contraband to raise cash). Many street gangs are controlled by government leaders (at all levels), and especially target anyone who speaks out against the government or against strict Islam. Radical Islamic groups that want to ferret out Christians and atheists also have connections and influence with gangs and corrupt or brutal police networks. Some criminals (individual or in a gang) act for their own benefit, but without specific intent to promote anarchy.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Maldives	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	-	-	STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	Weak
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

The government of the Maldives insists that the country has to be run according to conservative Islamic tenets and that all citizens have to be Muslim ("100% Islam"). This is a fundamental issue which the new government, coming to power in a surprise election, is not going to try changing. Therefore religious freedom does not exist, except in a very limited way for expatriate Christians who are strictly monitored and intimidated so much that they hardly dare to meet even behind closed doors. Radical Islamic preachers and clerics, whether homegrown or coming from the Middle East, are exerting strong socio-religious control of their groups and are influencing others with their radical views of Islam, making it impossible for Christians - especially converts - to show their faith due to the fear of monitoring and of being handed over to the authorities. Family and community are drivers of persecution for converts as well, if they are discovered.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

Politics in the Maldives has a history of being dominated by strongmen, who have clung to power by all means. Whether the newly elected president will break with this tradition remains to be seen. Civil servants and authorities will stick to what they know and the opposition will use every option to call the new government "un-Islamic" and a threat to the very identity of the country. Therefore, all the ingredients for more Dictatorial paranoia are all in place - at the expense of minorities and anyone seen as deviating from the norm.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

Radical Muslims are linking up with gangs and using them to ferret out Christians and atheists or anyone suspected of non-Muslim activity. Officials from the old government and various political parties allegedly made use of these means as well.

Context

In the WWL 2019 reporting period, the Maldives has sunk deeper into turmoil. Internationally, the picture of the Maldives being a holiday paradise has lost its shine, even though the tourist islands are kept far away from the real Maldives dominated by a strict form of Islam, social unrest and political challenges. Not even a month after his arrest, in March 2015, former President Mohammed Nasheed was sentenced to thirteen years in prison without getting a fair trial. Those protesting lost their jobs, as did several high-ranking politicians - including the Minister of Defense and the Vice-President. Former President Nasheed was permitted to travel to London in order to receive health treatment in January 2016, where he was granted political asylum in the United Kingdom in May 2016. Shortly afterwards, several (mainly exiled) politicians including Nasheed launched a platform called "United Maldives Opposition". This platform may not be 100% unified, but despite being exiled it has managed to further destabilize the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM). In July 2017, ten members of parliament decided to switch allegiance from the ruling party and [side with the opposition](#), a move which was not accepted by the Constitutional Court, [which banned them instead](#). [Banning parliamentarians](#) from entering the Parliament building - and thus hindering them from fulfilling the very duties for which they had been elected - as happened in August 2017 - is glaring proof of the fractured state of the Maldives. Even more proof was brought about in February 2018, when the Maldivian Supreme Court decided to [drop all charges of terrorism](#) made against several exiled or jailed members of the opposition. Included in the number of those acquitted was former President Nasheed. The government reacted immediately and declared the country to be in a state of emergency and [arrested two Supreme Court judges](#). Despite being elected by an overwhelming majority of party members, in June 2018 exiled former President Nasheed decided [not to try running as presidential](#)

[candidate](#) for his opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) in the September 2018 elections. On 26 October 2018, the country's Supreme Court unanimously [rejected](#) the charges against the election results, brought before it by incumbent President Abdulla Yameen. The latter had to [acknowledge his defeat](#) with a record of almost 39,000 votes behind Ibrahim Salih and immediately faced charges of corruption. On 1 November 2018, former President Nasheed [returned to the Maldives](#), cheered by thousands of supporters.

A sign that Islam and the protection of Islam always has top priority was given in July 2018, when a tourist resort was ordered to remove sculptures from a newly built underwater art gallery. The sculptures were considered 'idols' and therefore anti-Islamic, and were removed accordingly.

According to government estimates in August 2016, the Maldives are home to more than 130,000 migrant workers, most of them employed in the tourist sector. In relation to the number of inhabitants of the Maldives, an estimated 382,000 people in 2018, this is a surprisingly high number. Even more so as Transparency Maldives, a local NGO, estimates that the real number of migrant workers is closer to 200,000. Given these figures, it is not surprising that human trafficking [the illegal supply of migrant workers] is the second most lucrative economic sector after tourism, according to official government figures from 2011. These figures also imply that the lack of freedom of religion in the country affects not only the very small number of Maldivian Christians but also Christians from among the migrant workers.

Christian communities and how they are affected

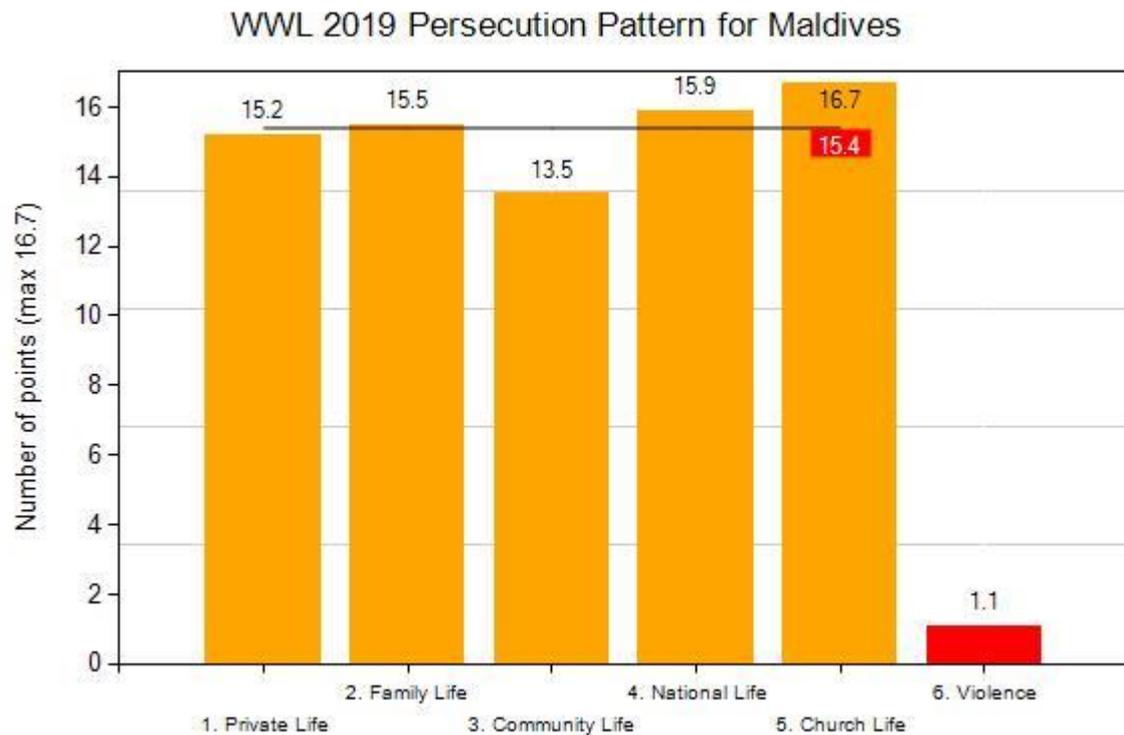
Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians often come from India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. These communities are monitored closely, but most of them have the freedom to worship provided they stay strictly amongst themselves. Expatriate Christians do not have any contact with indigenous converts from Islam.

Historical Christian communities: There are no historical churches in the Maldives.

Converts to Christianity: Christians with a Muslim background face by far the highest persecution as - officially - they do not exist in the country. It is understood that every Maldivian must be Muslim and anyone leaving Islam will lose his or her citizenship.

Non-traditional Christian communities: These do not exist in the Maldives.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The Persecution pattern for WWL 2019 shows:

- Pressure on Christians in the Maldives increased in all *Spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to be at an extreme level. It rose from a score of 15.3 in WWL 2018 to 15.4 in WWL 2019.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church sphere*, where it reached the maximum score for the second consecutive year, reflecting that in practice no meetings are possible and even most expatriate Christians prefer not to organize meetings out of fear of repercussions. Scores in the *National, Family and Private spheres* are also at an extreme level. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Family spheres*. All politicians tirelessly announce that they are keeping the Maldives 100% Muslim, leaving effectively no space for any deviation. It cannot be expected that the new government, inaugurated in November 2018, will change anything in this respect.
- The score for violence against Christians remained at 1.1 (as in WWL 2018), again confirming that persecution has never been very violent in the Maldives.

Private sphere:

Any Maldivian displaying a lifestyle different from what the government considers Islamic will be punished. Converts to Christianity always have to exercise the utmost care to hide their faith as much as possible. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution as their families will never accept their conversion and the possession of such literature could result in imprisonment. Even for migrant Christians it is dangerous to keep Christian materials in their possession (especially if these are in the native Dhivehi language or in large quantities) as the authorities may suspect they are being used to evangelize the local population. In fact, when entering the country, all travelers are required to declare any non-Muslim materials they are bringing in with

them. The law prohibits expatriate Christians from sharing about their faith to others, and their job contracts even stipulate this condition. Meeting with other Christians is a major challenge in these circumstances since, on the one the hand it is dangerous for the individual, and on the other hand it may disclose the whereabouts of and endanger a Christian meeting. There have been cases where even spouses only discovered after years that both of them were active Christians, as they had hidden their faith from one another out of fear. Private meetings are theoretically allowed for expatriates, but participants need to be very careful not to raise suspicion. As intimidation has increased, most Christians prefer not to meet at all.

In November 2016, [religious scholars](#) said that "those who want religious freedom in Maldives should go and live in other countries that grant it. Hence, those who want to practice other religions are free to leave the country. Only non-Muslims have the right to practice whatever religion they want to. If a Muslim leaves Islam that is blasphemy. If they do not repent, they should be killed." And in December 2016, the [Defense Minister](#) said: "The government of Maldives has taken necessary steps to ensure that Maldives remain as a hundred percent Islamic country and that one important step taken to protect the religion in Maldives is explicitly stating in the constitution that the state religion is Islam. You can be a Maldivian only if you believe in Allah. No laws that are contradictory to Islam can be made in the Maldives. Hence, Islam is protected in Maldives very well."

Family sphere:

Article 9 (d) of the Constitution states that a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives. Accordingly, if Maldivians are found to have converted to Christianity, they could be stripped of their citizenship as well as punished under the laws of *Sharia*. As every Maldivian is automatically understood to be a Muslim, registration for converts is out of the question. Similarly, expatriate Christians are not allowed to hold any religious activities in public (including Christian weddings, funerals, baptisms – which therefore have to be carried out in utmost secrecy). The Constitution states in Article 36 (c): "Education shall strive to inculcate obedience to Islam, love for Islam...". Children of converts are forced to study Islamic teachings, while children of expatriate Christians are exempt from attending Islamic classes. The Maldivian Democracy Network, a local human rights group, stated in a 2015 report that Islamic textbooks used in schools cultivate anti-Semitism and xenophobia, and glorify *jihad* or war against those who allegedly "obstruct" Islam. The prevailing social climate was shown as well in January 2018, when parents raised their concerns about "blasphemous" content in secondary school textbooks. Screenshots of grade eight textbooks featuring exercises about Roman gods began circulating on social media. Converts often decide not to share their new-won faith with their children out of fear that these may inadvertently tell others. Once converts are discovered, they can be put under pressure to divorce (if married) and lose both custody of their children and inheritance rights, and are likely to be isolated from their families. Under such circumstances, it is hard to imagine how any Christian family life can take place.

Community sphere:

Social control in the Maldives is extremely strong as the population density is one of the highest in the world, especially in the capital Malé. Expatriate Christians are not permitted to openly practice their faith and expatriate Christians with a Muslim background have virtually no place of privacy at all. Colleagues at work apply constant pressure to make them convert to Islam, trying to prove to migrant workers that Jesus is not the Savior and even using money or promises of promotion at times. Converts try to blend in with the majority of people around them in their efforts to hide their faith. This includes clothing as well as attendance at the local mosque. Any native believer who is caught not attending

will be questioned. Expatriate Christians enjoy more freedom, but there are times when they too are required to blend in, for example during Ramadan, by not drinking and eating in public.

National sphere:

The Constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The Constitution designates Sunni Islam as the official state religion, referring to the country as "100% Muslim", and government regulations are based on Islamic law. The Maldives take no little pride in this. 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, depending on the gravity of the offense. If the offenders are foreigners, they will usually be deported. Any opinions that seem contrary to Islam (even voices of Islamic moderation) are subject to harsh criticism and even violence. Especially with a "Defamation Law" in place, which includes clauses against anti-Islamic comments, Christians' freedom of speech is restricted even more than before. Violations can result in six months in prison. Slandering someone as a suspected or known Christian, or sabotaging their home or business (for example), not only elicits no punishment but is seen as a patriotic duty.

Church sphere:

It is illegal for Maldivians to become Christians, let alone to gather as a church. The expatriate community enjoys more religious freedom as long as they practice their faith strictly privately. There have been incidents where public gatherings of Christians were raided. Expatriate fellowships are under surveillance out of fear that they could be evangelizing local Maldivians. The government [banned Christmas celebrations](#) in guesthouses on inhabited islands in December 2015, claiming that the practice is contrary to Islam and Maldivian culture. The Local Government Authority (LGA) – chaired by Home Minister Umar Naseer – sent a letter to the presidents of island and atoll councils (as well as to the mayors of Malé and Addu cities) asking them to inform guesthouse owners not to conduct any celebratory activities for tourists at Christmas. The letter noted that the current period is the peak season for the tourist industry and that it had come to the LGA's attention that "tourists are carrying out activities to celebrate Christmas in the Maldives". Non-Islamic material is considered contraband and by law has to be declared at customs upon entering the country. Accordingly, Christian material cannot be imported or even produced in the country. According to the [USCIRF Country Report 2017](#), "Customs officials reported 13 cases during the year involving importation of religious idols, statues, and Christian crosses, mostly by Maldivians. The authorities confiscated items in nine of these cases and issued letters of caution in the other four." Training Christian leaders is out of the question and Christian communities are not allowed to receive foreign Christian workers for ministry work.

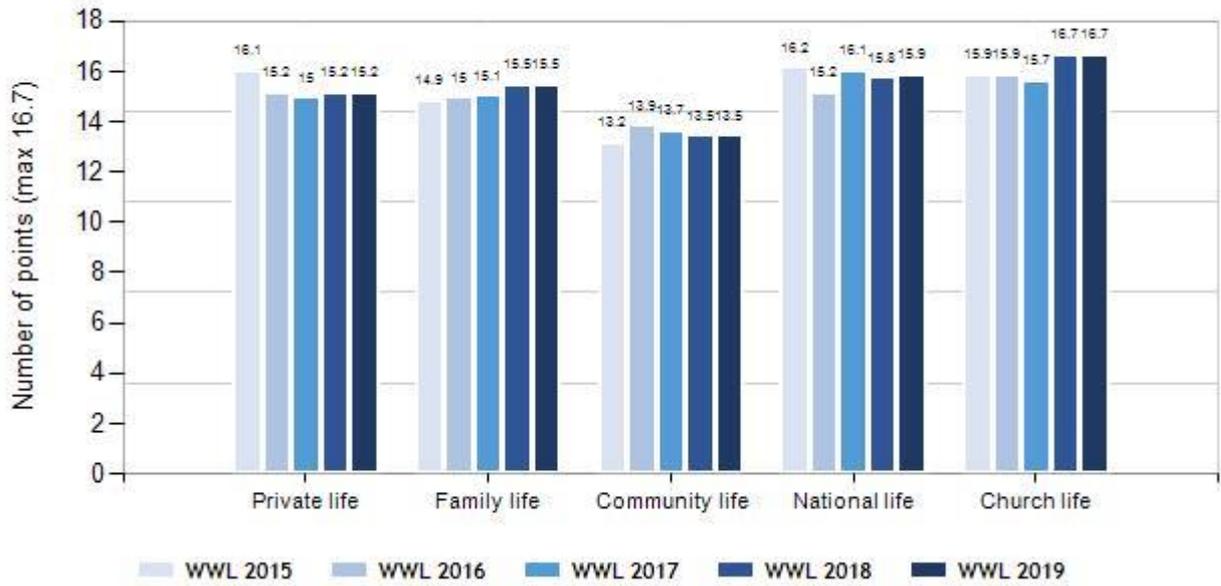
Violence:

Due to security considerations, no details can be given.

5 Year trends

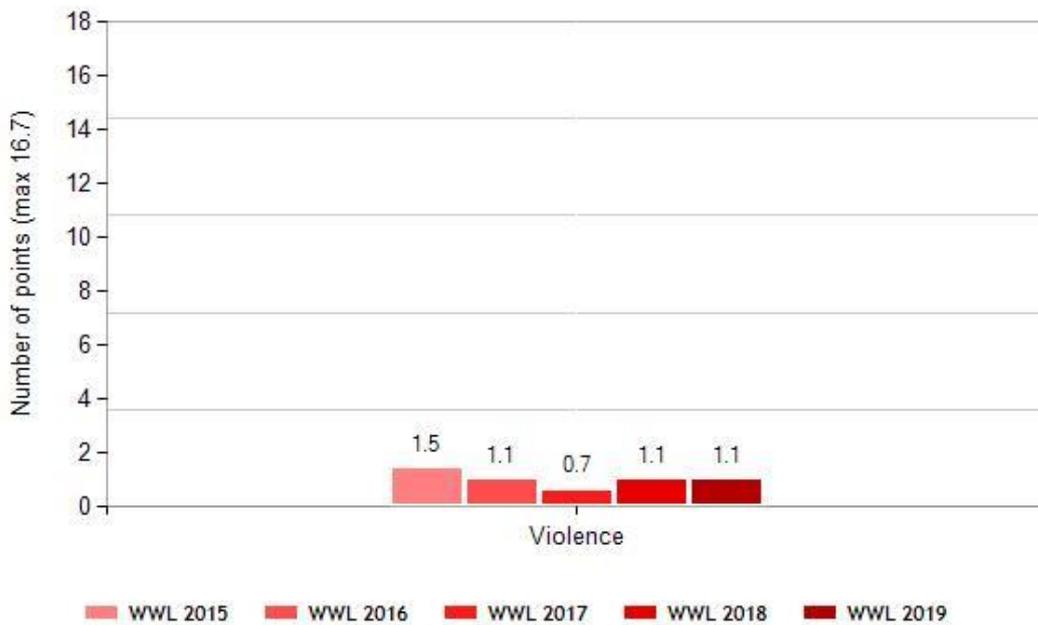
Chart 1 below shows the levels of pressure on Christians in individual *spheres of life* over the last five WWL reporting periods. The scores have not altered much over the years and have remained at very high and extreme levels. In *National Life*, the scores reflect the strong *Dictatorial paranoia*, whereas the other spheres reflect more the increasing *Islamic oppression*. The maximum scores in *Church sphere* since WWL 2018 stand out, reflecting the fact that church life has become almost impossible and even the expatriate Christians rarely meet for worship. Consequently, the average score for pressure (Chart 2) is at an extreme level and has slowly increased over the years. Persecution has, however, never been very violent, as can be seen in Chart 3.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Maldives (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Maldives	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	15.4
2018	15.3
2017	15.1
2016	15.0
2015	15.2

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Maldives (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Given the very strict interpretation of Islam in the Maldives, there is no difference in the ways Christian women and men are persecuted: Once they are discovered as converts, every effort will be made to bring them back to Islam. However, in general women and girls are more vulnerable as despite the closely-knit social control on the islands, abuse, rape and sexual harassment are surprisingly common and it is almost always the woman who is being punished for it. Christian women are affected by this as well.

Persecution 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 jail or even death.

Future outlook

The political outlook:

The Maldives has been a land in turmoil in recent years (excluding the islands used as tourist resorts). Civil liberties are increasingly restricted, including media and social media, as shown by the shocking [killing](#) of well-known blogger Yameen Rasheed in April 2017 in the capital Malé. Given that the government's goal of protecting Islam remains unchanged even after elections, it is plain that the situation for religious minorities, especially Christians, is becoming increasingly difficult.

The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- **Islamic oppression:** One observer referred to the Maldives as "[a Paradise lost to terrorism](#)". This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives do have one of the highest [per capita rates of terrorists fighting abroad](#). The government is well aware of these threats, but prefers to [heavily fine](#) media daring to publicize any such internal state details, as happened in June 2017. Additionally, the government is emphasizing its defense of being 100% Muslim. The fact that President Yameen chose the Chancellor of the Islamic University as his [running mate](#) for the presidential elections, confirms that he saw the protection of the country's religious purity as top priority. But even now, after the election which he lost, protecting and defending Islam will be the top priority of the government. Although the country relies heavily on international tourism, attempts to promote the unique attractiveness of the tourist resorts increasingly clashes with the country's staunch emphasis on a strict interpretation of Islam. In such an atmosphere, expatriate Christians need to continue to be very cautious and local Christians will have to keep hiding their faith carefully.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Outgoing President Abdullah Yameen had kept the Maldives in a permanent state of suspense and in a final effort to keep in power, even called a state of emergency. With the election of opposition forces into power, the highest level of paranoia may be gone. However, the country has a long and fraught track record of dictatorship and politicians clinging to power and minorities and others cannot expect any improvement in the freedom of religion in the near future.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** The island's younger generation continues to feel increasingly "disenfranchised and excluded" and "disconnected from the fabric of society", as indicated by a [World Bank report](#) released in October 2014. Rising globalization, internet use and economic expansion have "exposed young women and men to the outside world and new ideas and values,

making them acutely aware of what they can aspire to", reads the report. "Yet, both female and male youth face the shackles of the limited island economy, lack empowerment and community engagement, and contend with rigid norms of behaviour and increasingly conservative values, as well as an inadequate education and training system that ill prepares them for the labor market." The report argues that these issues mean that many young Maldivians are being "denied passage into adulthood". These social issues translate into a growing radicalization, as seen in the numbers of Maldivians who joined the fighting in Iraq and Syria, which fuels *Islamic oppression*. Others join the country's gangs, which are well connected with Maldivian power-brokers and politicians and are used as thugs against perceived enemies and dangers. As long as the younger generation lacks future perspectives, nothing will change in this respect.

Conclusion:

If the new leader Ibrahim Solih, elected with a huge margin in September 2018, is able to bring any substantial change to the Maldives remains to be seen. On 16 August 2018, Human Rights Watch [published a report](#) entitled "An all-out assault on democracy – Crushing dissent in the Maldives". It outlines recent developments in politics and human rights. The report serves now to outline what uphill struggles Solih will have to face. However, it was an encouraging step that the Constitutional Court - despite its judges being chosen by his predecessor and competitor Abdullah Yameen - [unanimously rejected](#) the latter's challenge of the election result.

Even with the help of recently returned former President Mohammed Nasheed it may prove difficult for the new government to steer the Maldives into clearer and quieter waters. All this, together with the political fracas reported above in the section "Context", shows that the persecution engines *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* are intertwined and very influential. Christians cannot expect any relief anytime soon.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

1. Persecution engines: apostates
<http://maldivesindependent.com/society/apostates-jihadists-and-extremists-face-tough-new-punishments-137396>
2. Persecution engines: never allow freedom of religion
<http://maldivesindependent.com/society/will-not-allow-religious-freedom-in-maldives-says-defence-minister-137455>
3. Persecution engines: 100% Islamic
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/islam-infrastructure-and-foreign-pressure-maldives-president-on-campaign-trail-139123>
4. Context: side with the opposition
<http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/ppm-refuses-to-accept-en-masse-resignation-of-lawmakers-131479>
5. Context: which banned them instead
<http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/mps-will-forfeit-seat-for-leaving-party-supreme-court-rules-131486>
6. Context: Banning parliamentarians
<file:///C:/Users/danielo/Desktop/Diverses/WWL%202018/In%20July,%20ten%20members%20of%20parliament%20decided%20to%20switch%20allegiance%20from%20the%20ruling%2>

Oparty%20and%20side%20with%20the%20opposition,%20a%20move%20which%20was%20not%20accepted%20by%20the%20Constitutional%20Court,%20which%20banned%20them%20instead.%20Banning%20parliamentarians%20from%20entering%20the%20Parliament%20building%20and%20thus%20hindering%20them%20from%20fulfilling%20the%20very%20duties%20for%20which%20they%20have%20been%20elected%20is%20glaring%20proof%20of%20the%20fractured%20state%20of%20the%20Maldives.%20The%20government%20seems%20to%20be%20in%20a%20state%20of%20paranoia%20according%20to%20the%20motto%20'Who%20is%20not%20for'<http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/dozen-opposition-mps-face-charges-for-entering-parliament-building-132008>

7. Context: drop all charges of terrorism
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/protests-maldives-pressure-release-prisoners-180202155355904.html>
8. Context: arrested two Supreme Court judges
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42955132>
9. Context: not to try running as presidential candidate
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/nasheed-gives-up-mdp-ticket-139032>
10. Context: rejected
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-top-court-rejects-presidents-petition-for-fresh-polls-142183>
11. Context: acknowledge his defeat
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-opposition-fears-president-will-flee-142151>
12. Context: returned to the Maldives
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/nasheed-welcomed-back-by-jubilant-supporters-142392>
13. Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: religious scholars
<http://www.miadhu.mv/article/en/6233>
14. Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: Defense Minister
<http://www.miadhu.mv/article/en/6669>
15. Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: banned Christmas celebrations
<http://maldivesindependent.com/business/maldives-bans-christmas-celebrations-at-guesthouses-120958>
16. Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: USCIRF Country Report 2017
<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=277287>
17. Persecution of other religious minorities: atheism
<https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-southern-asia/maldives/>
18. Future outlook: killing
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger->

dead.html?ref=todayspaper&utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=52f02e25af-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_04_24&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-52f02e25af-399904105&_r=0

19. Future outlook: "a Paradise lost to terrorism"
[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=45009&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=26&cHash=58349b6fb2aac945e6e3fc34f8bff85d](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=45009&tx_ttnews[backPid]=26&cHash=58349b6fb2aac945e6e3fc34f8bff85d)
20. Future outlook: per capita rates of terrorists fighting abroad
<https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2017/where-jihadists-are-heroes/>
21. Future outlook: heavily fine
<http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/cable-tv-provider-fined-half-a-million-for-airing-al-jazeera-corruption-expose-131202>
22. Future outlook: running mate
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-clerics-back-presidents-vp-pick-139262>
23. Future outlook: World Bank report
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/460551468263693729/pdf/939490WPOP15300th0Report0with0cover.pdf>
24. Future outlook: published a report
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/16/maldives-opposition-media-under-attack>
25. Future outlook: unanimously rejected
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-top-court-rejects-presidents-petition-for-fresh-polls-142183>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).