

A NATION AT A SPIRITUAL CROSSROADS

MAURITANIA



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PERSECUTION¹⁰¹⁶
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

Mauritania: A Nation at a Spiritual Crossroads

By Joseph Daniel

Introduction

Mauritania is at a pivotal moment in its history of religious freedom. It sits on the brink of recognizing its emerging national Christian minority, in tension with its history of Islam as the only recognized religion and its legacy of the death penalty for apostasy from Islam.

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania, in northwest Africa with a population of nearly 5 million people, ranks among the most sparsely populated countries in the world, with around two-thirds of the country being part of the Sahara Desert. The country has suffered from growing desertification, leading to increasing migration to the capital city, Nouakchott, by traditional livestock and subsistence agricultural areas that have traditionally employed most of the population. The mining sector, particularly some of the world's largest iron ore deposits, has attracted foreign investment in the country. However, the country has a 60% multi-dimensional poverty rate; most Mauritaniaans are still poor and reliant on subsistence agriculture and aid.

The nation is also simultaneously going through governance changes. With its first successful election in 2019, it has begun demonstrating its break from the past coups d'état and a continuation of the central government's opposition to violent Islamist Jihadist groups in the country. Human rights, including its suppression of freedom of speech and freedom of religion (for Mauritanian converts to Christianity), continue to put the government in the international spotlight. This fuels tension as Mauritania needs foreign investment yet must demonstrate progress toward human rights and freedom. Meanwhile, Islamist factions want to protect Mauritania's Islamic identity. Mauritania and the broader Sahel remain a strategic diplomatic and economic development region, attracting competing economic development and anti-terrorism support from Western powers, Russia, China, and regional forces such as Turkey, Morocco, and Algeria.

Religious Dynamics in Mauritania

Islam dominates life and culture in Mauritania. Islam spread to the region through Berbers and later Arab trade routes, including slave trade with the sub-continent, beginning Mauritania's notorious slave trade that was not abolished until 1981, and not criminalized until 2007. Starting in the 15th century, European colonial trade began in the region, but in the early 1900s, France incorporated it into its French West Africa colony. The French period began with the presence of Mauritania's small Catholic parish in Nouakchott that continues to exist today. Since independence in 1960, the country has undergone several coups, and in the 1980s, a growing segment of society was influenced by Islamist political and social movements as a part of the global spread of political Islam at the time. By the 1990s and early 2000s, the military government of Mauritania sought to stifle the power of such parties, and in the first part of the 2000s, the government also combated al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Tawassel, the leading Islamist political party in parliament, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, maintains a minority position in government; nevertheless, the strong grassroots of Islamist groups translates into strong street-level opposition to the growing numbers of Mauritaniaans who have converted to Christianity or who are accused of atheism/blasphemy against Islam, as evident by social media posts

and street protests in recent years when reports are released about lists of names of converts to Christianity.

Fast Facts of Religion in Mauritania

- 99% Muslim, 1% other (including Christians)
- Politically and socially, there is a delicate balance between Muslims who desire a more moderate, peaceful Islamist party ruling vs. those who push for a more hardline jihadist state.
- Estimated to be around 10,000 Christians in Mauritania, most of whom are expatriates, with growing small groups of local Christians throughout the country
- A released list by Mauritanian authorities, citing the “Christian problem” of local Christians revealed around 1,000 names, indicating the beginning of national recognition of the presence of at least 1,000 Mauritanian Christians.

Persecution Concerns

Persecution against Christians in Mauritania primarily manifests through strict legal frameworks and deep-rooted social hostility. The legal restrictions are particularly severe, with laws against apostasy and blasphemy serving as major obstacles for Christians. The apostasy law criminalizes leaving Islam, and in 2018, it was amended to remove the previously granted three-day window for repentance, increasing the severity of potential punishments. Despite these harsh laws, there have been no recent executions reported for conversion to Christianity, largely due to growing international scrutiny and pressure on human rights violations.

In response to the persecution, Christian communities in Mauritania have sought to demonstrate goodwill and social value through their contributions to society. Their work with disabled children, urban poor, rural literacy programs, economic development, and health care initiatives has helped counter the prevailing narrative, both online and in communities, that Christian organizations pose a threat to Mauritanian cultural values. In recent legal cases, when Mauritanian Christians were allowed to speak publicly, they effectively conveyed their loyalty and peace-oriented intentions as citizens who care deeply for their nation and its most vulnerable. Such visibility has not only humanized their cause but also built a broader awareness that may help prevent the implementation of the death penalty in future cases.

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Islam as the sole religion of the citizenry and state.

Persecution Incidents in Mauritania: A Timeline of Key Incidents Involving Christians (2008–2025)

April 2025

- A Christian man is buried in a Muslim cemetery. His body is exhumed after protests erupt against Mauritaniens converting to Christianity.

December 2024

- A Christian-themed Christmas party with Santa Claus imagery at a Mauritanian school triggers online criticism and cultural backlash.

December 2023

- A pastor and 14 elders are arrested after a baptism video went viral and drew backlash.

April 2023

- A man is arrested in Rosso after his son is caught with Bibles; he is charged with “tartuffery” (concealing apostasy), a charge carrying the death penalty. The charges are dropped, and he is released in July 2023.

January 2023

- U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Rashad Hussain, visits Mauritania.

February 2020

- Seven people are charged with terrorism for alleged anti-Islam activism, including three accused of preaching Christianity and distributing Bibles.

April 2018

- Mauritania removes the previous three-day repentance grace period on the death penalty for its national blasphemy and apostasy law.

March 2011

- Maymuna, the widow of a pastor, reports that her husband was the fourth Mauritanian martyred for his faith since 2009.

September 2010

- The discovery of a Bible translation in the Hassaniya dialect leads to protests in Mauritanian media.

June 2009

- Missionary Chris Leggett is martyred in Mauritania, devastating both local and expatriate Christian communities.

August 2008

- Al-Qaida declares jihad in Mauritania.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

As segments of Mauritanian society remain opposed to Christianity, there are also signs of gradually shifting attitudes toward religious minorities. The U.S. can play a constructive role in supporting this change by continuing its bilateral engagement with Mauritania across security, economic, and social development sectors. These partnerships should be closely tied to measurable progress in promoting freedom of speech, thought, and religion. The U.S. should consistently advocate to Mauritanian authorities for the protection of Christians, especially in the face of threats from Islamist groups. In

bilateral discussions, U.S. diplomats should highlight threats and attacks against Christians and advocate that Christians are a force for good in Mauritanian society and must be protected by security forces.

Methodology

This brief drew from online reports, interviews with Christian leaders in Mauritania, and local Mauritanian media and social media posts. Reports from international organizations provide background on religious freedom and legal conditions. Interviews offer personal insights into the experiences of Christian communities, while local media content reflects public sentiment and discourse. These sources were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and issues.

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Joseph Daniel previously served as ICC's Regional Manager for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). He has spent most of his life living, working and studying in the MENA region. He has on-the-ground experience leading relief, development, ministry and human rights initiatives in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and Armenia.