



NGO: EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR LAW AND JUSTICE (ECLJ)

**UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW
51ST SESSION**

**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA
FOR THE 51ST SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

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Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (Mauritania) for the 51st session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Background

2. Mauritania is a country located in Africa and has a population of approximately 4.6 million people.¹ The country is predominantly Muslim, with approximately 99.1% identifying as Sunni Muslim, 0.5% belonging to traditional faiths, and 0.4% identifying as Christian and other.² In its 2025 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Mauritania as the 23rd worst country for Christians.³ This ranking stems from the fact that Christian activities are restricted and the government has criminalized apostasy (leaving Islam).⁴

3. Mauritania's last review was held on January 19, 2021.⁵ As a result of the review, Mauritania received 266 recommendations, 201 of which it supported.⁶ It was recommended by Australia, but only noted by Mauritania, that the government "[d]ecriminalize apostasy and amend the Constitution to protect freedom of religion and allow people of a non-Muslim faith to remain citizens."⁷ It was also recommended by Italy, but only noted Mauritania, that the government "[e]nable Mauritians to fully enjoy the right to freedom of religion or belief and decriminalize apostasy."⁸ In our last UPR on Mauritania, we also expressed our concern over the laws that severely restrict the ability of Christians to freely practice their faith and the law that punishes apostasy with the death penalty.

Legal Framework

4. Under Article 5 of the Constitution of Mauritania, "Islam is the religion of the people and of the State."⁹ While the Constitution does not guarantee protections based on religion,

¹ *Mauritania*, BRITANNICA (July 9, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>.

² *Id.*

³ *Mauritania*, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/mauritania/> (last visited July 10, 2025).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Universal Periodic Review – Mauritania*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/mr-index> (last visited July 10, 2025).

⁶ *Mauritania Infographic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session37/MR/MAURITANIA-Infographics.pdf>.

⁷ OHCHR, UPR of Mauritania (3rd Cycle – 37th Session): Thematic List of Recommendations, 62, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session37/MR/UPR37_Mauritania_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.docx (last visited July 10, 2025).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ CONSTITUTION OF MAURITANIA 1991, art. 5, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mauritania_2012.

Article 1 states that “[t]he Republic assures to all citizens without distinction of origin, of race, of sex, or of social condition, equality before the law.”¹⁰

5. Article 306 of the Penal Code of Mauritania:

Any Muslim guilty of the crime of apostasy, whether by word or deed, whether apparent or evident, shall be invited to repent within three days. If he or she fails to repent within this period, he or she shall be sentenced to death as an apostate, and his or her property shall be confiscated to the Treasury.¹¹

6. Additionally, the government uses Article 11 of the Press Act to effectively ban proselytizing by prohibiting publications that contradict Islam.¹²

7. Additionally, Mauritania passed Law No. 2021-004 of February 10, 2021 that prohibits faith-based organizations from proselytizing or promoting any religion other than Islam.¹³

8. Mauritania is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹⁴ Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.¹⁵

9. However, Mauritania has a reservation to this article, which states: “While accepting the provisions set out in Article 18 concerning freedom of thought, conscience and religion, [Mauritania] declares that [its] application shall be without prejudice to the Islamic Shariah.”¹⁶

¹⁰ *Id.* at art. 1.

¹¹ PENAL CODE OF MAURITANIA, art. 306, <https://dullahomarinstitute.org.za/acjr/resource-centre/penal-code-of-mauritania/@@download/file/Mauritania%20Penal%20Code%201983.pdf> (unofficial internal translation).

¹² *Mauritania*, END BLASPHEMY LS., <https://end-blasphe-my-laws.org/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/mauritania/> (last visited July 10, 2025).

¹³ *Law No. 2021-004 of February 10, 2021 relating to Associations, Foundations, and Networks*, NATLEX, https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/r/natlex/fe/details?p3_isn=112996 (last visited July 10, 2025). See Edward Ross, *Christians in Area of Mauritania Fear for Their Lives After Protests Against Their Presence*, CHRISTIAN DAILY (Apr. 14, 2025), <https://www.christiandaily.com/news/christians-in-area-of-mauritania-fear-for-their-lives-after-protests-against-their-presence> (providing English translation to portions of Law No. 2021-004).

¹⁴ *Ratification Status for Mauritania*, OHCHR, <https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=110&Lang=EN>.

¹⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> [hereinafter ICCPR].

¹⁶ *Reservations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, OHCHR, https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=_en&mtdsg_no=iv-4&src=ind (last visited July 10, 2025).

10. Notably, Mauritania’s reservation to Article 18 of the ICCPR is against its object and purpose. Further, Mauritania has an obligation to uphold the rights established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Under Article 18 of the UDHR:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.¹⁷

Religious Persecution

11. In Mauritania, Christianity is often associated with “westernization,” which the government views as a threat.¹⁸ In order to suppress Christianity and preserve its Islamic identity, the government has criminalized apostasy, and those found guilty shall be sentenced to death.¹⁹ Further, the government limits Christian religious activity to the confines of the few churches that do exist in the country.²⁰ As such, Christians must be careful when talking about their faith to not create an appearance of proselytization.

12. Mauritania’s small Christian population is mostly comprised of foreigners from neighboring countries such as Senegal and Guinea Bissau.²¹ In Mauritania, the government has only recognized the Catholic Church, and all other denominations of Christianity are prohibited from having legal status.²² Because of this, Catholic churches allow other Christian denominations to use their buildings for worship.²³ Even though the Catholic Church has legal status and is permitted to have a few visible church buildings, the rights of Christians are still severely restricted.²⁴ For example, practically no Christian activities are permitted to be carried out outside the confines of the church.²⁵ Christians must be careful when conducting baptisms because it is viewed as a sign that proselytization and apostasy have taken place.²⁶

13. For example, in December 2023, fifteen Christian leaders, along with many of their family members, were arrested after a video of a baptism circulated on social media.²⁷ The arrests took place after protests erupted calling for the Christians involved in the baptism to be killed.²⁸ Thankfully, they were all released later that month.²⁹ According to a Christian

¹⁷ G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18 (Dec. 10, 1948).

¹⁸ OPEN DOORS, MAURITANIA: PERSECUTION DYNAMICS 10 (2025), https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Mauritania-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2025.pdf.

¹⁹ OPEN DOORS, MAURITANIA MEDIA ADVOCACY DOSSIER 6 (2025), https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Mauritania-Media_Advocacy_Dossier-ODI-2025.pdf.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* at 2.

²² OPEN DOORS, MAURITANIA: PERSECUTION DYNAMICS, *supra* note 18, at 17.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.* at 15.

²⁷ *Id.* at 8.

²⁸ 15 Christians Arrested in Response to Muslims’ Outrage in Mauritania, EVANGELICAL FOCUS (Dec. 22, 2023), <https://evangelicalfocus.com/world/24787/15-christians-arrested-in-response-to-muslims-outrage-in-mauritania>.

²⁹ OPEN DOORS, MAURITANIA: PERSECUTION DYNAMICS, *supra* note 18, at 8.

leader in Mauritania, the Muslim population has become concerned about the spread of Christianity and “[t]hey want to stop the progression of the gospel in this closed land.”³⁰

14. Additionally, since its last UPR, Mauritania passed Law No. 2021-004.³¹ Under this law, all faith based NGOs are prohibited from proselytizing and promoting any religion other than Islam.³² Further, all non-Muslim religious groups are required to obtain authorization from both the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (MIATE) to register and operate.³³ All group meetings, including non-Islamic religious gatherings, require prior authorization from the Ministry of Interior, even if they are being held in private homes.³⁴

15. Despite these harsh laws, there have been no recent executions reported for conversion to Christianity, largely due to growing international scrutiny and pressure regarding Mauritania’s human rights violations.³⁵ Even if they are not legally prosecuted, Mauritania Muslims who have converted to Christianity face significant social pressures, discrimination, and threats from their families and communities.³⁶ Christian converts from Islam risk losing their livelihood and being expelled from their families.³⁷ If a woman is found to have converted to Christianity, she risks being starved, put under house arrest, and bullied into renouncing her faith.³⁸ Further, many women do not have a choice in who they marry and are forced to marry a Muslim man.³⁹ If they refuse, they are often ostracized and left with no means to survive on their own.⁴⁰ Men who convert risk being ostracized and physically beaten.⁴¹ As a result, some Christian converts flee the country for their safety.⁴²

16. When it is discovered that an individual has converted to Christianity or they are found possessing Christian literature, it can incite an angry mob.⁴³ This is particularly true for converts outside of the capital city.⁴⁴ For example, in April 2025, Muslim imams in a southern city called for a demonstration against Christians, calling them “infidels” and “apostates.”⁴⁵ The demonstration was in response to Muslim leaders objecting to the burial of a Christian convert who died in a motorcycle accident.⁴⁶

³⁰ *Mauritania Arrests Christians in Response to Muslims Outrage*, CHRISTIAN DAILY INT’L (Dec. 13, 2023), <https://morningstarnews.org/2023/12/mauritania-arrests-christians-in-response-to-muslims-outrage/>.

³¹ *Law No. 2021-004 of February 10, 2021 relating to Associations, Foundations, and Networks*, NATLEX, https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/r/natlex/fe/details?p3_isn=112996 (last visited July 10, 2025). See Edward Ross, *Christians in Area of Mauritania Fear for Their Lives After Protests Against Their Presence*, CHRISTIAN DAILY (Apr. 14, 2025), <https://www.christiandaily.com/news/christians-in-area-of-mauritania-fear-for-their-lives-after-protests-against-their-presence> (providing English translation of Law No. 2021-004).

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Mauritania*, *supra* note 3.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ OPEN DOORS, MAURITANIA MEDIA ADVOCACY DOSSIER, *supra* note 19, at 5.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ OPEN DOORS, MAURITANIA: PERSECUTION DYNAMICS, *supra* note 18, at 14.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Mauritania: Demonstration Against Christians Planned*, MIDDLE EAST CONCERN (Apr. 6, 2025), <https://www.meconcern.org/2025/04/06/mauritania-demonstration-against-christians-planned/>.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

17. That same month, a Christian convert was buried in a Muslim cemetery in Sélilaby, which is contrary to Islamic tradition.⁴⁷ An angry crowd then exhumed the body and dragged it for dozens of meters while shouting “Allah Akbar,” as the protest escalated into an anti-Christian riot.⁴⁸

18. As demonstrated above, Mauritania does not respect the right to religious freedom. This can be seen both through its laws and its refusal to support recommendations that call for Mauritania to decriminalize apostasy and to promote religious freedom for all its citizens. While Mauritania has a reservation to Article 18 of the ICCPR, the reservation defeats the object and purpose of the ICCPR. Additionally, Mauritania has a responsibility to uphold the rights enshrined in the UDHR. Laws that prevent Christians from openly and publicly practicing their faith, as well as prohibiting Muslims from converting to other religions, contravene fundamental rights enshrined in the UDHR.

RECOMMENDATIONS

19. We remain concerned that the right to freely adopt a religion, a fundamental right that is found in the ICCPR and UDHR, is punishable by death in Mauritania. Mauritania must remove its reservation to Article 18 of the ICCPR and immediately reform its Criminal Code and permit people to freely adopt whatever religion they want. Further, we ask that Mauritania permit people of all faiths to freely and publicly practice their faith without fear of being arrested or harassed. The right to freedom of religion or worship is a fundamental human right that Mauritania must work to guarantee for all its citizens.

⁴⁷ *In Mauritania, the Body of a Christian Unearthed and Desecrated by an Angry Crowd*, INFO CHRETIENNE (Apr. 10, 2025), <https://www.infochretienne.com/articles/en-mauritanie-le-corps-dun-chretien-deterre-et-profane-par-une-foule-en-colere/>.

⁴⁸ *Id.*