

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Mauritania

Population: 3.52 millions (#133 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 1,030,700 square km. One of the largest nations in West Africa, Mauritania borders Western Sahara, Algeria, Mali, and Senegal. The Sahara Desert occupies most of the terrain, which consists of plains, low elevation plateaus, and some small hills. Extreme southern areas near the Senegal River receive greater moisture and are more vegetated. Most of the country is unproductive, barren land. Droughts and sandstorms and dust storms created by the sirocco wind are natural hazards. Environmental issues include overgrazing, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, lack of fresh water, and locust infestations. Mauritania is administratively divided into fifteen regions.

Peoples

Mixed Moor (black [Harantines]): 40%

Moor (white [Beydane]): 30%

Black African: 30%

Moors consist of numerous tribes and clans who have endured for centuries and dominate most aspects of politics and government today. Mixed Moors, or black Moors, intermarried with black Africans in the region and are politically less represented. Black Africans consist of Pulaar, Wolof and Soninke ethnicities and are underrepresented in some government sectors. Moors have historically enslaved the black African population. Although slavery was officially outlawed in 1981 and criminalized in 2007, approximately 20% of the population is estimated to be enslaved at present.

Population: 3,758,571 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.17% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 3.86 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 61.1 male, 65.8 female (2017)

Languages: Hassaniya Arabic (81%), Pulaar (6%), Soninke (5%), Tamashek (3%), other (4%). Arabic is the official language.

National languages include Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof—the latter three of which are predominately spoken along the Senegal and Mali border. French is also spoken. Only Hassaniya Arabic has over one million speakers (3.36 million).

Literacy: 52.1% (2015)

History

Indigenous African tribes and Bafours populated the region prior to Berber and Arab invasions around 1000 AD. For the following centuries, Arabs attempted to subjugate the population with stiff resistance. France gained control of Mauritania by the late nineteenth century. In 1960, Mauritania gained independence from France. Following the collapse of Spanish Sahara, Mauritania occupied the southern third of the country until withdrawing in 1976. A military coup led by Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya overthrew the government in 1984 and maintained rule for two decades. In 2005, a coup overthrew Taya, and in 2007 the first fair democratic elections were held, bringing President Abdallahi to power. The following year, General Aziz overthrew the government. Aziz held elections the following year and was elected president. Mauritania has struggled for many years with its ethnic relations between Moors and blacks and its identification as either an African Muslim or an Arab Muslim state.

Culture

Nearly all Mauritanians lived nomadic lifestyles until the past century, and many today still live as nomads. Islam heavily influences daily life and Mauritanian culture under Shari'a law. Conflict between white Moors and black African groups is pervasive. Arabs, black West Africans, and Berbers have made significant contributions to culture, including language, education, and customs. Alcohol consumption rates are very low due to the high percentage of Muslims, whereas cigarette consumption rates are moderate and compare to Norway. Polygamy is legal and frequently practiced among the middle and lower classes.[1] Women in Mauritania experience fewer rights than men such as in regards to education, and are often subjected to forced marriages and female genital mutilation. Mauritanians experience some of the lowest literacy rates in the region as approximately half the population is illiterate.

Economy

GDP per capita: $4,400 (2017) [7.40% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.513

Corruption Index: 28 (2017)

Mauritania has experienced limited economic growth and development since independence, as half of the population relies on agriculture and their livestock to survive. Fish, iron ore, and precious metals are the most abundant natural resources. Recurrent drought, poor government management, and civil strife are obstacles for foreign investment and greater economic growth. Agriculture produces 22.5% of the GDP, whereas services accounts for 39.7% of the GDP. Common crops include dates, millet, sorghum, rice, and corn. Industry generates 37.8% of the GDP and employs 2% of the population. Major industries include fish, oil, and mining. Primary trade partners include China, Switzerland, Belgium, and the United Arab Emirates.

Corruption is perceived by the population as widespread in most areas of society, especially in government and law enforcement. Government has supplied little information to its citizens regarding its affairs and lacks transparency to safeguard against corruption. Prostitution is a growing concern, especially among Black Moors and Afro-Mauritanians. Human trafficking and slavery remain an international concern. Little has been done to address current human trafficking and slavery issues.

Faiths

Muslim: 100%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 4,500?

Seventh Day Adventists – 69 – 1

Latter-day Saints – less than 10 – 0

Religion

The population is almost entirely Sunni Muslim. Non-Muslims are primarily foreigners or immigrants. There are a few Roman Catholics and other Christians who reside in the largest cities. Although Christian proselytism is not permitted, foreign religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) perform humanitarian service and development work.[2]

Religious Freedom

The constitution declares Mauritania an Islamic republic. Only Muslims are permitted to be citizens. Citizens who convert from Islam to another religion lose their citizenship. Printing or distributing non-Islamic religious materials and non-Islamic proselytism is forbidden. The possession of non-Islamic religious materials is permitted. Christians and non-Muslim religious groups may meet in private but must first obtain official authorization from government authorities. Mauritanian citizens are not permitted to attend non-Islamic religious meetings. Religious groups do not register with the government, but religious NGOs must agree to refrain from engaging in missionary activities at any time. Islam classes in public and private schools are required courses for students. Christians who have attempted to proselyte in the past have been detained or deported.[3] The few Mauritanian Christians are ostracized by their family and friends.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 53.7%

Nouakchott, Nouâdhibou, Kiffa, Mbera, Kaédi, Zouérat, Rosso, Sélibabi, Atâr, Aïoun.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

None of the ten largest cities have an LDS congregation. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

Mauritania became part of the Africa West Area in 1998.[5] There has never been an LDS presence in Mauritania. The first known Mauritanian to join the Church was baptized in Turkey in 2014.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 10 (2018)

Any LDS members in the country likely consist of nonnatives temporarily living in Nouakchott.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0 (2018)

In 2018, the Church reported no organized congregations in Mauritania. Mauritania is assigned to the Africa West Area Branch.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, French, English.

All LDS scriptures and many church materials are available in Arabic and French. Materials translated into Wolof and Pulaar (Fulani) include Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Humanitarian and Development Work

In 1985, some of the funds donated by Church members for famine relief in Africa went to Mauritania.[6] In recent years, the

Church provided emergency relief for refugees in Nouakchott.[7]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The constitution, current government policies, and Shari'a law severely limit any potential LDS Church presence in Mauritania. Latter-day Saint missionaries or members are not permitted to proselyte or distribute religious literature. Mauritanian citizens who join the Church would likely lose their citizenship. Prospects for greater religious freedom appear doubtful for the foreseeable future. Conducting humanitarian service and establishing good rapport with the government appear possible courses of action.

Cultural Issues

Islam is highly intertwined with daily living and presents the greatest cultural obstacle to any prospective LDS mission outreach, as there is no room for non-Muslim religious groups to operate outside the humanitarian service and development work arena. Christian groups are heavily regulated by the government and only permitted to assemble once approved by government authorities, including for private meetings in homes. Mauritanian citizens are not permitted to attend non-Islamic religious meetings. The prevalence of polygamy and poor human rights in some areas such as slavery, forced marriage, and female genital mutilation create an unfavorable atmosphere for mission outreach to occur even if local laws and customs did not prohibit proselytism.

National Outreach

The entire population remains unreached by mission outreach efforts. Future mission outreach initiatives will most likely concentrate on small Christian communities in Nouakchott and other large cities.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

At least one Mauritanian has joined the Church abroad. The lack of any native members in Mauritania and abroad will continue to delay any progress establishing the Church.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Mauritania exhibits profound tension between white Moors and other ethnicities. Clan conflicts may manifest themselves at church if individuals from rival clans or ethnicities were to attend the same congregation.

Language Issues

Translations of all LDS scriptures and many church materials in Standard Arabic may be utilized by literate Mauritanians fluent in Standard Arabic. LDS materials in Hassaniya Arabic appear warranted due to differences with Arabic dialects spoken in the Middle East. Only half the population is literate. Service opportunities exist for literacy programs.

Missionary Service

No reported members from Mauritania have served full-time missions. Missionaries have never been assigned to Mauritania.

Leadership

No Mauritanian leadership has been developed. Initial church leadership will most likely rely upon non-Mauritanian members.

Temple

Mauritania is assigned to the Accra Ghana temple district. There are no reports of temple trips occurring from Mauritania. Prospective temple trips would exact a significant amount of time and money.

Comparative Growth

Mauritania has no LDS Church presence like most Islamic African nations. The only African nations with a clear Muslim majority and an LDS presence are Djibouti, Egypt, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Most Christian groups have no presence in Mauritania, and denominations with a presence are limited to foreigners living in the country. Current laws and social pressures prohibit any proselytism.

Future Prospects

Mauritania may be among the last nations to have an official LDS presence due to current laws forbidding proselytism, ethnic conflicts, the many restrictions placed upon non-Muslim groups, the strong influence of Islam on society, lack of native Christians, and perhaps only a few Mauritanian LDS converts worldwide. Establishing a humanitarian presence and engaging in clean water projects, literacy programs, and development projects in conjunction with other Christian groups or government agencies appears the most appropriate course of action for the future.

[1] “West Africa,” Islamic Family Law: Social/Cultural Information by Region, retrieved 18 August 2010. http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/region/westafrica.html

[2] “Mauritania,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127244.htm

[3] “Mauritania,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 18 August 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280764#wrapper

[4] “Mauritania,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127244.htm

[5] “5 new areas announced worldwide,” LDS Church News, 4 July 1998. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/31389/5-new-areas-announced-worldwide.html

[6] “News of the Church,” Ensign, Nov 1985, 99–112.

[7] “Projects—Mauritania,” Humanitarian Activities Worldwide, retrieved 18 August 2010. http://www.providentliving.org/project/0,13501,4607–1–2008–75,00.html