

MAURITANIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these restrictions.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, raised the issue of religious freedom with senior leaders in the government. Additionally, they engaged local religious leaders at all levels on religious freedom issues and nominated a prominent religious figure to participate in an exchange program.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.4 million (July 2013 estimate). Most are Sunni Muslims. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims, almost all of whom are foreigners. There are Roman Catholic and other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. A small number of foreign residents are Jews, although there are no synagogues.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the sole religion of its citizens and the state. Only Muslims may be citizens. Persons who convert from Islam lose their citizenship.

The law prohibits apostasy. A Muslim convicted of apostasy who does not recant within three days may be sentenced to death and have his or her property confiscated, though the government has never applied capital punishment for this offense. The law does not prohibit proselytizing, but government policy prohibits such activity by non-Muslims through broad interpretation of the constitutional assertion, "Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the State."

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The government prohibits printing and distributing non-Islamic religious materials. Possession of these materials is legal, however.

The law and legal procedures in the country derive from a combination of French civil law and sharia (Islamic law). The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that uses principles of Islamic law in matters concerning the family and secular legal principles in all other matters.

The government regards Islam as the essential cohesive element unifying the country's ethnic groups. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (MIATE) enacts and disseminates fatwas, fights "extremism," promotes research in Islamic studies, organizes the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, and monitors mosques. The six imams of the High Council of Islam advise the government on conformity of legislation to Islamic precepts. The High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals has sole authority to regulate fatwa issuance and resolve related disputes among citizens and between citizens and public agencies.

The government does not register religious groups, but all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Interior Ministry. NGOs must agree to refrain from proselytizing or otherwise promoting any religion other than Islam.

The government requires that the Interior Ministry authorize all group meetings, including non-Islamic religious gatherings, in advance, even those held in private homes, although officials do not always enforce this requirement.

An unofficial government requirement restricts non-Muslims to holding worship services only in the few recognized Christian churches.

The government requires members of the Constitutional Council and the High Council of Magistrates to take an oath of office that includes a promise to God to uphold the law of the land in conformity with Islamic precepts.

The government provides funding to mosques and Islamic schools.

Both public schools and private, Islamic schools include classes on Islam. Although attendance at these religious classes is ostensibly mandatory, many students do not attend for various ethno-linguistic, religious, and personal reasons.

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Students are able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas despite missing these classes, provided they perform sufficiently well in their other classes.

Government Practices

The government enforced legal restrictions on religious freedom.

On October 12, local media reported that police had detained five suspected missionaries in Nouadhibou, who allegedly carried t-shirts identifying them as “Youth of the Church.” Police authorities reportedly believed that the lettering on the shirts referred to a congregation of Christians based in Nouadhibou. Mauritanian authorities released all five pending the completion of an investigation.

The government continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups to promote “moderation.” In April the MIATE organized a conference on principles of human rights prescribed by Islam for 50 imams and religious scholars from Adrar and Inchiri *wilayas* (provinces). In September the MIATE organized awareness training for 137 imams across the country. The one-month course focused on the responsibility of religious authorities to encourage moderate interpretations of Islamic doctrine.

The government maintained a quranic radio station and sponsored regular television programming on themes of moderation in Islam.

The government paid monthly salaries of 50,000 ougiya (approximately \$169) to 200 imams who fulfilled stringent selection criteria. In January the government also began to offer monthly salaries of 25,000-100,000 ougiya (approximately \$85-\$339) to members of the National Union of Mauritanian Imams, an authority established in 2010 to regulate the relationship between the religious community and the MIATE.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

International Christian NGOs or their employees reported that family members and neighbors ostracized persons who participated in Christian gatherings.

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In September a group of conservative religious activists launched an initiative to preserve Sunni Maliki identity in the country and counter Iranian influence and alleged Shia evangelism. They reportedly embarked on a campaign to increase awareness of the “growing threat” of Shia practices.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, discussed religious freedom with senior government officials. On multiple occasions, the embassy advocated for religious freedom with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and with the Commission for Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Civil Society.

The embassy engaged local religious leaders at all levels on the subject of religious freedom. On July 17, embassy representatives visited Imam Sheikh Ould Zeidane, Secretary General of the Association for Dialogue between Religion and Society, to discuss the role of Islamic scholars in aligning religious and cultural practices with changing social values. The embassy also arranged for an imam to travel to the United States to participate in an April 2013 official exchange program promoting religious tolerance. During Ramadan the Ambassador and other embassy officers hosted iftars for members of the government and civil society, during which they highlighted the importance of religious tolerance.