

UNION OF THE COMOROS 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution specifies Islam is the state religion but proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all regardless of religious belief. The law establishes the Sunni Shafi'i doctrine as the only allowable religious practice in the country and provides sanctions for any other religious practice, other than by foreigners. Non-Islamic proselytizing and conversion from Islam is prohibited, although the government did not always enforce these proscriptions.

There were reports that local community members unofficially shunned citizens who they thought had converted from Islam to Christianity, but there was reportedly little or no societal discrimination against non-Muslim foreigners.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom. Embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom with religious and civil society leaders, and others.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 781,000 (July 2015 estimate). The U.S. government estimates the population is 98 percent Sunni Muslim (July 2015 estimate). Non-Sunni residents include Shia Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, and Protestants. Members of non-Muslim religious groups, made up primarily of expatriates, are concentrated in the country's capital, Moroni, and the capital of Anjouan, Moutsamoudou. The Shia adherents are mostly based in Anjouan.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states Islam is the state religion and citizens shall draw the state's governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. It proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all individuals regardless of religion or belief. A law establishes the Sunni Shafi'i doctrine as the only allowable religious practice in the

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country and provides sanctions of five months to one year imprisonment and/or a fine of 100,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs (\$230 to \$1149) for any other religious practice, on the grounds of avoiding social unrest and the undermining of national cohesion.

Proselytizing for any religion except Sunni Islam is illegal, and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The law provides for prosecution of converts from Islam, but penalties are not clearly defined.

The law does not allow non-Sunni Muslim religious groups to be licensed, registered, or officially recognized. The law allows organized Sunni religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy, and assemble for peaceful religious activities. It does not allow non-Sunni Muslim citizens to establish places of worship or assemble for peaceful religious activities.

By law the president nominates the grand mufti, the senior Muslim cleric who is part of the government and manages issues concerning religion and religious administration. The grand mufti's position is attached to the Ministry of Justice, Public Service, Administrative Reforms, Human Rights, and Islamic Affairs, and he counsels the government on matters concerning the practice of Islam and Islamic law. The grand mufti chairs and periodically consults with the Council of Ulemas, a group of religious elders cited in the constitution, to assess whether citizens are respecting the principles of Islam.

The law requires children between the ages of three and six to attend Quranic schools, either private or government-run, to instill moral, cultural, and Islamic values and to familiarize the child with the Arabic language. There are no penalties prescribed for failing to send children to these schools. There is no other provision for religious education in public schools. The government does not require the children of foreigners to receive Islamic instruction or Arabic language training.

Government Practices

The government continued to enforce consistently the laws prohibiting proselytizing or conversions from Islam but did not prosecute any such cases during the year. The government generally continued to not enforce bans on alcohol or "immodest" dress.

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Non-citizens of other faiths reported they did not need government authorization to organize and assemble for peaceful religious activities. The government did not interfere with their religious practice, although they were not allowed to hold public religious events.

The grand mufti regularly addressed the country on the radio, applying Islamic principles to social issues such as delinquency, alcohol abuse, marriage, divorce, and education.

Almost all children between the ages of three and six attended private, informal schools at least part-time to learn to read and recite the Quran. In response to reports of child labor abuses at some of these schools in previous years, the government continued to expand the introduction of Arabic reading instruction using the Quran in public primary schools to eliminate the demand for unlicensed and unregulated private classes. The government continued to integrate kindergarten into the primary schools and met its goal to have 200 public schools with Quranic instruction. The tenets of Islam were sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public and private schools at the middle school and high school levels.

The government funded an Islamic studies program, known as the Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Science (Imam al-Shafi'i Faculty) within the country's only public university. The government stated it initiated this step 10 years ago to ensure the availability of local educational opportunities and to respond to concerns that youth who studied abroad in countries with differing or no Islamic traditions could return home and attempt to influence what the government considered to be the moderate Sunni tradition on the islands. The government restricted study by citizens in Iran and Pakistan.

The government allowed foreigners to establish non-Islamic places of worship, and there were two Christian churches on each of the country's three principal islands.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

As in previous years, there were reports communities unofficially shunned from community activities citizens who were suspected of converting from Islam to Christianity. International NGOs report there was little or no societal discrimination against non-Muslim foreigners.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom. The representatives also met with Muslim religious and civil society leaders and others on issues of religious freedom.