



2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - Mauritania

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives raised the issue of religious freedom with government officials, including President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Embassy staff discussed UN resolutions concerning religious freedom with government officials, and engaged local religious leaders at all levels on religious freedom issues. The embassy nominated prominent religious figures to participate in an exchange program.

Section I. Religious Demography

A 2011 National Statistics Office report estimates the population to be 3.3 million. Most are Sunni Muslims. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims, almost exclusively foreigners. There are Roman Catholic and other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Although there are no synagogues, a very small number of foreign residents are Jews.

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

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

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 modern 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 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 conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts. A new High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals, appointed in May, 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 in advance, even those held in private homes, although officials did not always enforce this requirement.

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

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

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: First Muharram (Islamic New Year), Eid al-Mowlud (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Eid al-Fitr, and Tabaski (Eid al-Adha).

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including detention, and the government enforced legal restrictions on religious freedom.

On April 29, the government arrested twelve anti-slavery activists and charged them with sacrilege and blasphemy, along with other civil charges, for publicly burning religious texts to denounce what the activists viewed as support for slavery in Islamic commentary and jurisprudence. On May 3, the government publicly condemned the "sacrilegious act of incinerating fundamental works of Islam." Seven of the anti-slavery activists remained in prison until September 3 when judicial authorities terminated the proceedings on technical grounds. A court order subsequently freed all the activists.

The government informally advised Christians seeking to build a new church in Nouakchott that it would not approve the request. The authorities stated that the construction of a community center would be acceptable and the center's activities could take place unimpeded as long as they were discreet.

The government continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups to promote "moderation." The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education and the International Wasatiyya (Centrist) Forum co-sponsored a January conference on "Reformist Thought and Banishment of Violent Discourse." In March and April the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education organized training for 170 imams across the country. The training focused on Islam's role in society, the danger of "extremism," and the unity of rite in a harmonious society.

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

The government paid monthly salaries of 50,000 um (approximately \$167) to 800 imams who fulfilled stringent selection criteria.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

International organizations active among Christians reported that family members and neighbors ostracized persons who participated in Christian gatherings.

On April 28 and 29, protestors gathered peacefully in Nouakchott and in other towns to express anger over the burning of religious texts by anti-slavery activists. A minority urged the government to charge the activists with apostasy and punish them severely.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government. On July 5, the ambassador and the special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference raised the issues of religious freedom and freedom of expression and the media with President Aziz. The embassy closely monitored the case of anti-slavery activists detained for burning religious texts. Additionally, 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, particularly regarding UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions.

The embassy engaged local religious leaders at all levels on the subject of religious freedom. On November 7, embassy representatives visited the Mauritanian Scholar Training Center to discuss training female Islamic scholars and to explore potential partnerships. The embassy arranged for an imam to travel to the United States to participate in the March 2012 Interfaith Dialogue. During Ramadan, the embassy hosted iftars for members of the government and civil society.