

Document #2051663

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Mauritania

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Islam as the sole religion of the citizenry and state. The law prohibits blasphemy and apostasy, and defines them as crimes punishable by death. In February, police arrested 15 individuals in connection with a meeting of the Alliance for the Refoundation of the Mauritanian State (AREM), an association that aims to promote a secular state. Authorities initially charged eight persons with blasphemy; five of them were held in pretrial detention from February to October. The court did not convict any of the eight of blasphemy, but instead convicted all of them on lesser counts of violating the “prohibitions prescribed by Allah.” All of the defendants were fined and sentenced to various prison terms. The five held in pretrial detention since February were all released by October 26, since their time in pretrial detention was counted towards their overall sentence. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (MIATE) continued to collaborate with independent Muslim religious groups as well as with foreign partners to combat what it termed threats of extremism, radicalization, and terrorism, primarily through workshops throughout the country.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials raised apostasy, blasphemy, and other religious freedom issues with authorities on multiple occasions, and the Ambassador urged authorities to release the five individuals who were held in pretrial detention for nearly eight months on charges of blasphemy. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the Prime Minister, the Minister of Islamic Affairs, and the Minister of Justice. Embassy staff also met with senior members of the opposition Tawassoul Party to discuss political and social issues, including religious freedom. The embassy also promoted messages of religious freedom on its social media platforms in English, French, and Arabic, including to celebrate International Religious Freedom Day.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.0 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to host government estimates, Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 99 percent of the population. Unofficial estimates, however, indicate that Shia Muslims constitute 1 percent of the population and non-Muslims, mostly Christians and a small number of Jews, make up a further 1 percent. Almost all non-Muslims are foreigners.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the sole religion of its citizenry and the state. The law and legal procedures derive from a combination of French civil law and sharia. The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that relies on a combination of sharia and secular legal principles.

The law prohibits apostasy. The criminal code requires a death sentence for any Muslim convicted of apostasy, but the government has never applied this provision since it was enacted in 2018.

The criminal code also treats blasphemy as a capital offense and subject to the death penalty. Courts may consider an individual’s repentance as a mitigating factor in determining the punishment for offenses related to blasphemy and apostasy. The government has never applied capital punishment for blasphemy.

The penal code stipulates that the penalty for unmarried individuals of any gender caught engaging in sexual activity is 100 lashes and imprisonment of up to one year. The penalty for married individuals convicted of adultery is death by stoning, although the last such stoning occurred more than 30 years ago. The penal code requires death by stoning for males convicted of consensual homosexual activity. These punishments apply only to Muslims.

The government does not register Muslim religious groups, but all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of Interior. Faith-based NGOs must also agree to refrain from proselytizing or otherwise promoting any religion other than Islam. The law requires the Ministry of Interior to authorize in advance all group meetings, including non-Islamic religious gatherings and those held in private homes.

By law, the MIATE is responsible for enacting and disseminating fatwas, fighting “extremism,” promoting research in Islamic studies, organizing the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, and monitoring mosques. The government also appoints the High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals, which advises the government on conformity of legislation to Islamic precepts, and which has sole authority to regulate fatwa issuance and resolve related disputes among citizens and between citizens and public agencies.

The law 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.

Public schools and private secondary schools, but not international schools, are required to provide four hours of Islamic instruction per week. Religious instruction in Arabic is required for students seeking the baccalaureate.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In early February, police arrested 15 individuals in connection with a meeting of AREM, an association that promotes a secular state. Although several of those arrested were released after questioning, eight were charged with blasphemy and other offenses related to holding unauthorized meetings and using social media to attack Islam. Five of the eight were held in pretrial detention from February until their court hearing on October 20. The court did not convict the eight men of blasphemy, which is punishable by death, but instead convicted all of them on lesser counts of violating the “prohibitions prescribed by Allah.” All eight were fined and sentenced to various prison terms. The five who were held in pretrial detention since February were sentenced to six- and eight-month prison terms, but the judge said that their time spent in pretrial detention would be counted towards their overall sentences, and the five were released by October 26.

The government continued to forbid non-Muslims from proselytizing, although there was no specific legal prohibition. The government continued to ban any public expression of religion except that of Islam.

The possession of non-Islamic religious materials remained legal, although the government continued to prohibit their printing and distribution. The government maintained a Quranic television channel and radio station. Both stations sponsored regular programming on themes of moderation in Islam.

Authorized churches were able to conduct services within their premises but could not proselytize. An unofficial government requirement restricted non-Islamic worship to the few recognized Christian churches. There are Roman Catholic and other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Kaedi, Atar, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Citizens could not attend non-Islamic religious services, which remained restricted to foreigners.

On January 21, President Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani chaired the opening ceremony of the first international forum on the role of Islam in Africa. The government organized the forum in collaboration with Cheikh Mahfoudh Ould Boya’s forum for peace. The forum explored areas of cooperation among Islamic countries and published a statement outlining the importance of tolerance and moderation in Islam in Africa.

On May 6, the government adopted a draft bill to prevent violence against women and girls. The government adopted the bill after consultation with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the MIATE, which discussed ways to make the draft law more compatible with sharia principles. Although the draft law advanced in the legislative process, the National Assembly, which previously rejected two earlier drafts of this bill on grounds of “noncompliance with Islam,” had not voted on whether to adopt the law by year’s end.

During the year, relations between the government and leaders of the Islamist movement in the country continued to improve, according to media reports. On June 24, President Ghazouani met with the former president of the Islamist Tawassoul Party, Mohamed Jemil Mansour. The government also worked with Tawassoul, the largest opposition party in the National Assembly, to adopt legislation aimed at mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several international Christian NGOs reported they continued to operate successfully in the country. The government continued to advance the draft Law on Associations (the “NGO Law”) through the legislative process. The law, once adopted, would change the registration system to make it easier for NGOs, including faith based organizations, to register and operate.

The MIATE continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups and other foreign partners to combat what it termed extremism, radicalization, and terrorism. On September 10, the MIATE organized a two-day meeting with the European Union and G5 Sahel member states, including Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger, at which they shared best practices for preventing violent extremism and stressed the importance of a moderate, tolerant version of Islam.

The government continued to provide funding to mosques and Islamic schools and universities under its control. The government also organized an examination to recruit 800 imams and prayer callers, which officials said enabled them to select imams who supported moderate versions of Sunni Islam instead of imams that supported Wahhabism. The government paid monthly salaries of 5,000 ouguiyas (\$140) to 800 imams who passed the examination conducted by a government-funded panel of religious authorities. It also paid monthly salaries of 2,500-10,000 ouguiyas (\$68-\$270) to 30 members of the National Union of Mauritanian Imams, an authority established to regulate the relationship between the religious community and the MIATE.

Islamic classes remained part of the educational curriculum, but class attendance was not mandatory and not required for graduation. Academic results in the classes did not count significantly in the national exams that determined further placement. Many students reportedly did not attend these classes for various ethnolinguistic, religious, and personal reasons. The Ministry of National Education and the MIATE continued to reaffirm the importance of the Islamic education program at the secondary level as a means of promoting Islamic culture and combating religious extremism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, frequently discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Justice, and Minister of Islamic Affairs. Embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with authorities on multiple occasions, including throughout the pretrial detention period for those whom authorities accused of blasphemy and proselytizing. Embassy officials also met with senior members of Tawassoul to discuss political and social issues, including religious freedom.

On several occasions, the Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss issues related to religious tolerance. Visiting U.S. officials also routinely raised the importance of religious tolerance with a range of societal groups, including think tanks and journalists.

The embassy also frequently used its social media platform to share religious freedom posts, including on International Religious Freedom Day, in English, French, and Arabic.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious
freedom (covering 2020)

Country:

Mauritania

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mauritania/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

12 May 2021

Document ID:

2051663

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

