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USDOS – US Department of State

2019 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. Only Muslims may be citizens. On July 29, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ould Mkhaitir, a blogger held by the government in administrative detention after being sentenced to death for apostasy in 2014, was released and departed the country; at year's end, he was in France, where he was given temporary domicile while his application for asylum was considered. 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 extremism, radicalization, and terrorism, primarily through workshops throughout the country. On September 26, the spiritual leader of the principal Islamist political party Tawassoul, Cheikh Mohamed Hacen Ould Deddew, met with the new minister of Islamic affairs; some observers said the meeting could signal the possible reopening of a religious training center run by Deddew that the government closed in 2018.

An international Protestant community, which conducted services for several years on the grounds of the Catholic Church, began holding services at a newly consecrated, stand-alone church in Nouakchott in December.

U.S. embassy officials raised apostasy, blasphemy, and other religious freedom issues with authorities on multiple occasions, and the Ambassador urged authorities to release blogger Mkhaitir. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including both the outgoing and incoming minister of Islamic affairs. The Ambassador and embassy officials hosted two iftars, during which they discussed religious tolerance with government officials and religious and civil society leaders. The Ambassador and other embassy staff also met with senior members of the Tawassoul Party to discuss political and social issues, including religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the country at 3.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to official sources, Sunni Muslims constitute an estimated 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. Only Muslims may be citizens. Persons who convert from Islam lose their citizenship. The law and legal procedures derive from a combination of French civil law and religious sharia law. The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that relies on a combination of sharia and secular legal principles.

The law prohibits apostasy. Although the National Assembly amended the criminal code in April 2018 to require a death sentence for any Muslim convicted of apostasy, the government did not apply capital punishment in this regard.

The amended criminal code also treats blasphemy as a capital offense and subject to the death penalty. The amendments remove the possibility that courts may consider an individual's repentance as a mitigating factor in determining the punishment for offenses related to blasphemy and apostasy.

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 Islamic 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

On July 29, the government released blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ould Mkheitir from prison and permitted him to depart the country. After an initial stop in Senegal, on August 3, he relocated to France, where his application for permanent asylum was pending a decision by French authorities. A court sentenced Mkheitir to death in 2014 for apostasy after statements he published on social media criticizing the use of religious precepts to justify discrimination and hereditary slavery were judged to be critical of the Prophet Muhammad. Mkheitir had been held in administrative detention despite a 2017 ruling by an appeals court reducing his sentence to two years and ordering his release. The government, however, stating it had concerns for Mkheitir's safety, continued to hold him in administrative detention. On July 9, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs convened several dozen leading imams to discuss Mkheitir's case with then president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. The imams agreed that Mkheitir should be freed conditional on a public declaration of his repentance on national television, which Mkheitir delivered on July 11.

In December 2018 the parliament rejected for a second time a law criminalizing gender-based violence for “noncompliance” with the precepts of Islam. On December 11, an interministerial committee led by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood, and Family that also included the Ministry of Justice and the MIATE met for the first time to discuss ways to make the draft law more compatible with sharia principles so that it could be brought before parliament in 2020.

During the year, relations between the government and leaders of the Islamist movement in the country improved, according to media reports, particularly after the June 22 election of President Mohamed Cheikh El Ghazouani. On September 26, the spiritual leader of the principal Islamist party Tawassoul, Cheikh Mohamed Hacen Ould Deddew, met with the new minister of Islamic affairs; some observers said the meeting could signal the possible reopening of a religious training center run by Deddew that the government closed in 2018.

Several international Christian NGOs reported they continued to operate successfully in the country. The new government began the process of drafting legislation to facilitate registration for NGOs.

The MIATE continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups and other foreign partners to combat extremism, radicalization, and terrorism. On May 3, the MIATE, in collaboration with the Association of Ulema of Mauritania, organized and supervised a training session for 40 imams on the dangers of hate speech and extremism.

Although there remained no specific legal prohibition against non-Muslims proselytizing, the government prohibited such activity through a broad interpretation of the constitution that states Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the state. Any public expression of religion except that of Islam remained banned.

Authorized churches were able to conduct services within their premises but could not proselytize. An unofficial government requirement restricted non-Muslim worship to the few recognized Christian churches. There were 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 December 22, government officials attended a service at the Catholic Church in Nouakchott during which the papal nuncio's honorary consul general was recognized for his service.

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.

The government continued to provide funding to mosques and Islamic schools and universities under its control. The government paid monthly salaries of 5,000 ouguiyas (\$140) to 200 imams who passed an examination conducted by a government-funded panel of imams and heads of mosques and Islamic schools. 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 determine further placement. Many students reportedly did not attend these religious 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

During the annual Eid al-Adha observance, Imam Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, the imam of the Grand Mosque of Nouakchott, renewed his warnings about the growing influence of Shia Islam in the country. Rahman stated for a fourth successive year that government authorities should sever ties with Iran in order to stop the spread of Iranian-backed Shia Islam.

In December an international Protestant community, which conducted services for several years on the grounds of the Catholic Church, began holding services at a newly consecrated, stand-alone church in Nouakchott.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including with MIATE officials. Embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with authorities on multiple occasions, and the Ambassador urged authorities to release blogger Mkheitir. Members of Mkheitir's family and legal team noted the importance of U.S. engagement in ensuring Mkheitir's health and security during his detention as well as in achieving his eventual freedom.

The Ambassador met regularly with religious leaders to discuss issues related to religious tolerance. During Ramadan, the Ambassador and a senior embassy official hosted iftars that included discussions with local officials, journalists, religious leaders, and civil society representatives. The Ambassador and other embassy staff met with senior members of the Tawassoul Party to discuss political and social issues, including religious freedom.

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