

Title	2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Mauritania
Publisher	United States Department of State
Country	Mauritania
Publication Date	30 July 2012
Cite as	United States Department of State, <i>2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Mauritania</i> , 30 July 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/502105a16e.html [accessed 27 November 2012]
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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Mauritania

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies restricted religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

Almost the entire population practices Sunni Islam. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims, who are almost exclusively foreigners. Roman Catholic and other Christian churches are located in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Although there are no synagogues, a very small number of foreign residents practices Judaism.

There are several foreign faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in humanitarian and developmental work in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The 1991 constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the sole religion of its citizens and the state. Due to this stance, all non-Muslims are restricted from being citizens of the country. Persons who convert from Islam lose their citizenship.

Article 306 of the penal code outlaws apostasy. It states that any Muslim found guilty of the crime will be given the opportunity to repent within three days and if the person does not repent, the individual will be sentenced to death and the person's property will be confiscated by the Treasury.

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

There is an unofficial government requirement that restricts non-Muslims to holding worship services only in the few Christian churches in the country. However, religious groups can meet in private homes after they receive official authorization.

The law and legal procedures in the country are based on the government's interpretation of 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 and citizenry consider Islam to be the essential cohesive element unifying the various ethnic groups in the country. There is a cabinet-level Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education tasked with enacting and communicating fatwas, fighting religious extremism, promoting research in Islamic studies, organizing the pilgrimage and the Umrah, and monitoring mosques. The High Council of Islam, consisting of six imams, advises the government on conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts.

Although there is no specific legal prohibition against proselytizing by non-Muslims, in practice the government prohibits such activity through the broad interpretation of article five of the constitution that states, "Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the State."

The government does not register religious groups; however, NGOs, including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of the Interior. NGOs must agree to refrain from proselytizing or otherwise promoting any religion other than Islam. In addition, the government requires that groups, including religious groups, receive official authorization before they can meet, even in private homes. Officials did not always enforce this requirement in practice.

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 restricts the use of mosque loudspeakers exclusively to the call to prayer and to Friday services in accordance with a 2003 law that prohibits the use of mosques for any form of political activity.

The government, mosque members, and other donors normally supported mosques and Islamic schools and made their contributions mainly during the month of Ramadan.

Both public schools and private Islamic schools include classes on Islam. Although attendance at these religious classes ostensibly is required, many students decline to attend for various ethnolinguistic, 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 no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The constitution restricted religious freedom, and the government generally enforced these restrictions. There was no sizable non-Muslim community in the country; government enforcement of these restrictions was not tested during the year.

In an effort to curtail radical extremism, the government collaborated with independent religious organizations on various round tables focused on moderation in Islam.

In April, the Association of Mauritanian Religious Scholars organized a workshop under the supervision of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The discussion highlighted Islam's values

of moderation and forgiveness in society. This followed the October 2010 national dialogue on extremism and terrorism, which sought to build national consensus on the best response to these issues.

The government continued to pay monthly salaries of 50,000 um (\$172) to 500 moderate imams who fulfilled stringent selection criteria and passed a test.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The government continued to take measures against extremism, including through the opening of a state-sponsored Qur'anic radio station and regular television programming on themes of moderation in Islam.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, international organizations active among Christians reported that persons who participated in Christian gatherings were ostracized by their families and neighbors.

In June the Web site *Alakhbar.info* published a three-article series about Christian activities in the country. The articles focused on supposed efforts to translate the Bible into Hassaniya, Christian evangelism in the country, and an interview with the Nouakchott bishop calling on the government to accept conversions to Christianity. Although the articles provided the names of alleged local converts and foreign missionaries, there were no reports of reprisals or harassment.

In May the Forum of Islamic Thought and Dialogue and the Association of Mauritanian Religious Scholars sponsored a conference to clarify the issuance and enhance the integrity of fatwas.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy actively engaged prominent religious leaders in a dialogue to broaden mutual understanding of religious freedom principles and invited Imam Cheikh Ould Zein, Secretary General of the Association for Dialogue between Religions and Civilizations, to continue this dialogue as part of the International Visitor Leadership Program from March 21 to April 10.

Uniquely among Western missions in the country, the U.S. embassy observed Ramadan by hosting iftars (evening meals during Ramadan) for members of the government and civil society. In addition to a traditional men's iftar on August 18, the embassy hosted its first women's iftar on August 24 for female parliamentarians, business and media figures, and NGO heads.
