

MAURITANIA

The constitution and other laws and policies restricted religious freedom and, in practice, the government enforced these restrictions. The 1991 constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. The government prohibits the printing and distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and proselytizing by non-Muslims.

The government generally enforced legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government, religious leaders, and civil society as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 419,212 square miles and a population of 2.9 million.

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 practice Judaism.

There were 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

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies restricted religious freedom and, in practice, the government enforced these restrictions. The 1991 constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the sole religion of its citizens and the state.

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. However, religious groups can meet in private homes after they receive official authorization from the authorities.

Sharia (Islamic law) provides legal principles upon which the law and legal procedures are based. 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 5 of the constitution that states, "Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the State."

The government and citizenry consider Islam to be the essential cohesive element unifying the country's various ethnic groups. There is a cabinet-level Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education. The High Council of Islam, consisting of six imams, advised the government on conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts. The government, mosque members, and other donors normally supported mosques and Islamic schools. Most contributions were made during the month of Ramadan.

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. This requirement was not always enforced in practice.

The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that uses principles of Sharia in matters concerning the family and modern legal principles in all other matters. The testimony of two women is necessary to equal that of one man under Sharia. In awarding an indemnity to the family of a woman who has been killed, the courts

grant only half the amount they would award for a man's death. For commercial and other issues not addressed specifically by Sharia, the law and courts treat women and men equally.

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 service in accordance with a 2003 law that prohibits the use of mosques for any form of political activity.

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 Eid al-Adha (Tabaski).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally enforced legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In an effort to curtail radical extremism, the government sponsored various round tables on moderation in Islam and an October national dialogue on extremism and terrorism, which sought to build national consensus on the best response to these issues. The government also conducted a census of all mosques in the country and launched a new initiative to pay monthly salaries of 50,000 um (\$72) to 500 moderate imams who fulfilled stringent selection criteria and passed a test. Other recent measures against extremism included the opening of a state-sponsored Qur'anic radio, regular television programming on themes of moderation in Islam, and a national dialogue between imams and Salafists who have renounced violence, which resulted in presidential pardons to repentant Salafists during the

September Eid al-Fitr and the November Eid al-Adha holidays. A total of 52 Salafists benefited from these pardons, none of whom had committed blood crimes. More than 200 common criminals were also pardoned and released during these holidays as a traditional gesture of clemency.

In an effort to erode support for al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the July counterterrorism law offered an amnesty to combatants who had not committed blood crimes and who surrendered before their arrest. The government may ask them to renounce violence in public. On November 7, the government released AQIM combatant Ahmed Ould Weiss after he deserted an AQIM camp and surrendered to authorities.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

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

In November 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 Hassania, 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses 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 to explain the freedom with which Muslims practice their religion in the United States. The embassy provided a small grant to a local imam organization to organize round tables on tolerance and moderation.