

UNION OF THE COMOROS

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Islam is the state religion. 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 few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There continued to be societal discrimination against non-Muslim citizens, particularly Christians and those who converted from Islam.

The U.S. government did not maintain a full time presence in the country. U.S. embassy officers traveled regularly to all three islands that make up the country to engage government officials and citizens on bilateral issues and projects, and discussed religious freedom issues as part of an ongoing dialogue and overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is estimated at roughly 800,000 and is 99 percent Sunni Muslim. There are several hundred non-Sunni residents on the islands, including Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, and Protestants.

A few foreign faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including two U.S.-based Protestant groups--the very small Bahari Foundation and the "Groupe de Service Voluntaire"--have operated humanitarian and development programs for nearly 20 years with strong community ties and no government interference.

There are very few non-Sunni places of worship. There are Shia mosques, a Hindu temple, and one Christian church on each of the three islands. The best known example is the Catholic Church in Moroni, for which the surrounding "Quartier du Cathedral" neighborhood is named. Its parishioners are nearly entirely foreign residents, who worship without incident.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom; however, the constitution also states that citizens will draw governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. A constitutional referendum passed in May 2009 states that “Islam is the state religion,” but in practice there was no change in the legal status of religious freedom. In general, the authorities enforced all laws, including those protecting religious freedom, in an inconsistent and unpredictable manner.

Proselytizing for any religion except Islam is illegal. Foreigners caught proselytizing for religions other than Islam were subject to deportation under the law, though no such cases have been brought before the courts in recent memory. Consequences for citizens caught proselytizing are unknown. Converts from Islam may be prosecuted under the law, though penalties are ill-defined and the law has not been tested in practice.

Nominated by the president, the grand mufti is part of the government and manages issues concerning religion and religious administration. The grand mufti’s position is attached to the Ministry of Justice, Public Service, Administrative Reforms, Human Rights and Islamic Affairs, and he counsels the government on matters of the practice of Islam and Islamic law. The grand mufti periodically consults with a group of elders to assess whether the principles of Islam are being respected, and he regularly addresses the country on the radio regarding social and religious issues such as delinquency, alcohol abuse, marriage, divorce, and education.

The government does not require religious groups to be licensed, registered, or officially recognized.

While the study of Islam is not compulsory in public schools, the tenets of Islam were sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public schools at the middle school level. The public school system is in disarray and curricula vary widely; private schools with French curricula and madrassahs fill the gap. There were no provisions for religious education of religious minorities in public schools; however, foreigners can request that their children not receive Islamic instruction or Arabic language training. Individuals who belong to minority faiths do not protest that their tenets are not taught in the schools, accepting the benefits of an education as the overriding value. Almost all children between the ages of four and seven attend private schools at least part-time to learn to read and recite the Qur’an. Although attendance is subject to social pressure, there is no government sanction for opting out, amounting to *de facto* respect for the right to choose one’s level of practice of the religion.

The government funded the country's only public university to assure the availability of local educational opportunities, in part due to concerns that youth who have studied abroad in countries with differing or no Islamic traditions could return home and attempt to influence the traditional moderate Sunni tradition on the islands.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Kabir, and the Islamic New Year.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government did not consistently enforce the law prohibiting conversions from Islam. In fact, in recent years such prosecutions have been extremely rare and have not resulted in any convictions.

The government allowed organized religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy to serve believers, and assemble for peaceful religious activities. However, most non-Muslim citizens maintained a low profile in the practice of their faith out of respect for the deeply ingrained Sunni Islamic traditions of the islands.

The government does not generally enforce bans on alcohol and "immodest" dress, with broad acquiescence to these strictures originating out of social pressures, particularly during Ramadan.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There continued to be societal discrimination against non-Muslim citizens, particularly Christians and those who converted from Islam. Non-Muslim citizens faced societal pressure to refrain from religious practice; however, non-Muslim foreigners encountered little to no discrimination. All citizens faced some familial and societal pressure to practice the most significant elements of Islam, particularly observing the fast and doing good works during Ramadan.

Most societal pressure and discrimination occurred behind closed doors at the village level. In the past, non-Muslim converts have self-excluded themselves from schools or villages after facing discrimination for “evangelizing to Muslims.” The extent of discrimination typically depended on the degree of influence exercised by local imams and other teachers of Islam. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to largely restrict the use of the country’s three churches to noncitizens. There are very few Christians in the country, and they tend to avoid familial and social ostracism by avoiding open practice of their religion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government did not maintain a full-time presence in the country. An officer from the embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar, engaged with the country through periodic multi-week visits. Other agencies and sections within the embassy at times sent officers and locally employed staff for temporary work in the country. The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with authorities as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.