

# **UNION OF THE COMOROS 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for equal rights and duties without distinction based on religion or belief, but other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The law provides sanctions for any religious practice other than the Sunni Shafi'i doctrine of Islam and for prosecution of converts from Islam, and bans proselytizing for any religion except Islam. Islam is the state religion, and the constitution states that citizens will draw governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. The government detained 18 Shia in Anjouan on at least two occasions and warned them that only the Shafi'i doctrine could be practiced. In November the 18 Shia were charged with "subversion, the propagation of religious education banned in the country, disturbing the public order, and presenting a threat to social cohesion." In December, 15 of the defendants were convicted and received prison sentences, fines, or both. The government disallowed non-Sunni Muslims from establishing places of worship or assembling for peaceful religious activities.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal discrimination continued against non-Muslim citizens, particularly Christians and those who converted from Islam.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Staff of the U.S. Embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar traveled regularly to Grand Comore and periodically to Anjouan and discussed religious freedom issues with government officials, religious and civil society leaders, and others.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 750,000 (July 2013 estimate). It is more than 99 percent Sunni Muslim. The several hundred non-Sunni residents include Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, and Protestants.

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### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for equal rights and duties without distinction based on religion or belief, but other laws and policies generally restrict religious freedom. The constitution states citizens will draw governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets and Islam is the state religion. A law regulating religious practices establishes the Sunni Shafi'i doctrine as the only allowable religious practice in the country and provides sanctions for any other religious practice on the grounds of avoiding social unrest and the undermining of national cohesion and unity. The government states it ratified the law due to fears of religious radicalization.

Proselytizing for any religion except Islam is illegal, and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The law provides for prosecution of converts from Islam, but penalties are ill defined.

The president nominates the grand mufti, who 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 concerning the practice of Islam and Islamic law. The grand mufti periodically consults with a group of elders to assess whether citizens are respecting the principles of Islam, and he regularly addresses the country on the radio, applying Islamic principles to social issues such as delinquency, alcohol abuse, marriage, divorce, and education.

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

The tenets of Islam are sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public schools at the middle school level. There is no other provision for religious education in public schools. The government does not require the children of foreigners to receive Islamic instruction or Arabic language training. The public school system is under development, and curricula vary. There are also private schools with French curricula and a few madrassahs.

Almost all children between the ages of four and seven attend private, informal schools at least part-time to learn to read and recite the Quran. Although attendance is subject to social pressure, there is no government sanction for opting

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out. In response to reported child labor abuses in some of these informal neighborhood schools, the government is introducing Arabic reading using the Quran in public primary schools to eliminate the need for these unlicensed and unregulated classes. There are more than 200 government-run quranic instruction schools.

### Government Practices

The government detained 18 Shia in Anjouan on at least two occasions and warned them that only the Shafi'i doctrine could be practiced. In November the 18 Shia were charged with “subversion, the propagation of religious education banned in the country, disturbing the public order, and presenting a threat to social cohesion.” In December, 15 of the defendants were convicted. The leader of the group was sentenced to ten months in prison and fined 500,000 Comorian francs (KMF) (\$1,384). Eight other defendants received sentences of eight months in prison and were each fined KMF 2.5 million (\$6,919). Six of the charged received a five-month suspended sentence and were fined KMF 100,000 (\$277), while the remaining three were acquitted and released after renouncing Shia beliefs during court proceedings.

The government did not consistently enforce the laws prohibiting proselytizing or conversions from Islam. Although there were no prosecutions, in November the grand mufti reportedly accused two members of the Groupe de Service Volontaire (Voluntary Service Group – GSV), a nongovernmental organization, of proselytizing. Subsequently, village elders expelled the two GSV members from the village where they had been teaching English.

The government allowed organized Sunni religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy, and assemble for peaceful religious activities. It did not allow non-Sunni Muslim citizens to establish places of worship or assemble for peaceful religious activities, but allowed foreign nationals to do so.

The government funded the country's only public university, reportedly to ensure the availability of local educational opportunities and respond to concerns that youth who studied abroad in countries with differing or no Islamic traditions could return home and attempt to influence what the government considered to be the moderate Sunni tradition on the islands.

The government did not generally enforce bans on alcohol and “immodest” dress.

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### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, particularly of non-Muslim citizens. Isolated Christians, who were not connected to the Catholic parish or the Protestant mission group, and those who converted from Islam, faced societal pressure to refrain from religious practice. Non-Muslim foreigners encountered little to no discrimination. All citizens faced some familial and societal pressure to practice major tenets of Islam, particularly observing the fast and doing good works during Ramadan. There were reports of increasing village-level tension surrounding isolated adherents of Shia Islam on the island of Anjouan, who were seen as out of step with the country's Sunni norm. The tension was connected to political differences between the former president and the current administration.

Most societal pressure and discrimination occurred at the village level. Converts to non-Muslim religions sometimes removed themselves from schools or villages after facing discrimination. The extent of discrimination typically was proportional to the degree of influence exercised by local imams and other teachers of Islam. Societal pressure and intimidation kept most citizens away from the three churches, which were attended almost exclusively by foreigners. The very few Christian citizens generally practiced their religion openly only in association with established Christian groups such as the Catholic Church.

The Protestant-affiliated GSV continued to operate humanitarian and development programs, as it has for nearly 20 years, with strong community ties and little interference other than the expulsion of the two GSV English teachers from their village.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar periodically visited the country and engaged with government officials, religious and civil society leaders, and others on issues of tolerance and religious freedom.