

MAURITANIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Islam as the sole religion of the citizens and state. Only Muslims may be citizens, and apostasy is a crime punishable by death. The government imprisoned a man on charges of apostasy, and a court convicted and sentenced him to death. Security forces quelled a religiously inspired riot, which left at least one demonstrator dead and several dozen injured. The authorities also continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups to combat extremism, radicalization, and terrorism through a series of workshops in all 13 provinces.

There were reports of societal discrimination against the alleged apostate and against those who publicly supported him or advocated for his fair trial.

U.S. embassy representatives, including the former Charge d'Affaires and the current Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials on multiple occasions. In June and July they urged government officials from the Ministries of Justice, Interior and Decentralization, and Foreign Affairs and Cooperation to condemn a fatwa of death, which a Salafist leader directed at a human rights activist who had spoken out against religious intolerance. The embassy also issued a public statement in support of a local human rights consortium that defended the activist.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.5 million (July 2014 estimate). Nearly all are Sunni Muslims. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews, almost all of whom 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 citizens and the state. Only Muslims may be citizens. Persons who convert from Islam lose their citizenship.

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The law and legal procedures in the country derive from a combination of French civil law and sharia. The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that uses principles of sharia in matters concerning the family and secular legal principles in all other matters.

The law prohibits apostasy. A Muslim convicted of apostasy who does not recant within three days may be sentenced to death and have his or her property confiscated, although the government has never applied capital punishment for this offense. The law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing, but government policy prohibits such activity by non-Muslims through broad interpretation of the constitutional provision that “Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the State.”

The government does not register religious groups, but all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the interior ministry. NGOs must agree to refrain from proselytizing or otherwise promoting any religion other than Islam.

The law requires the interior ministry to authorize all group meetings, including non-Islamic religious gatherings, in advance, even those held in private homes, although officials do not always enforce this requirement.

According to law, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (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 six imams of the High Council of Islam advise the government on conformity of legislation to Islamic precepts. The High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals 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.

A ministerial decree requires public schools and private secondary schools – but not international schools – to teach four hours of Islamic studies per week.

Government Practices

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The government used the law prohibiting apostasy to punish a man whom it alleged affronted Islam. On January 2, authorities arrested Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed (better known as “M’kheytir”), a young blogger who had published an article they said criticized the Prophet and implicitly blamed the nation’s religious establishment for the plight of the country’s “forgeron” (blacksmith) caste. Charged as an apostate, Ould Mohamed remained imprisoned throughout the year. Although the conditions of his confinement were unknown, detention facilities across the country lacked reliable access to health care and were poorly ventilated or unsanitary. On December 24, following a two-day trial, the criminal court in Nouadhibou found Ould Mohamed guilty of apostasy and sentenced him to death. At year’s end, Ould Mohamed remained in jail, and the government had not announced a date for his execution.

On March 4, rolling protests swept through the capital, leaving at least one dead and several dozen injured. The unrest began with an early morning demonstration in front of the presidential palace, where protestors vented their outrage at a report, later shown to be unfounded, alleging four unidentified men had desecrated a Quran at the Khaled bin Walid Mosque in northern Nouakchott. Comprised of between 3,000 and 5,000 participants, the demonstrations turned riotous before mid-day and continued through late evening. Authorities responded with tear gas and live gunfire when confronted with disorderly crowds, which blocked capital roadways with burning tires and other makeshift obstacles. Police eventually arrested several dozen demonstrators, some of whom were reportedly Quranic students. Although sporadic demonstrations continued through March 5, calm returned to the capital on the following day. Those arrested were released shortly thereafter.

The government continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups. Throughout the year, the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization organized a series of workshops on combating extremism, radicalization, and terrorism in all 13 *wilayas* (provinces). On September 14, the MIATE organized a symposium for approximately 400 imams from across the country. The two-day conference focused on the responsibility of religious authorities to assist the government in its efforts to eradicate what the government termed “the vestiges” of slavery.

An unofficial government requirement restricted non-Muslims to holding worship services only in the few recognized Christian churches. There were Roman

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Catholic and other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso.

The government provided funding to mosques and Islamic schools.

The government launched *Al Mahdra TV*, a Quranic television channel and maintained a Quranic radio station. Both stations sponsored regular programming on themes of moderation in Islam.

The government prohibited printing and distributing non-Islamic religious materials, but possession of these materials was legal.

The government paid monthly salaries of 50,000 ougiya (\$164) to 200 imams who passed an examination by a government-funded panel of imams and headed mosques and Islamic schools. It also paid monthly salaries of 25,000-100,000 ougiya (\$82-\$328) to 30 members of the National Union of Mauritanian Imams, an authority established to regulate the relationship between the religious community and the MIATE.

Although attendance at state-mandated religious classes was ostensibly mandatory, many students did not attend for various ethno-linguistic, religious, and personal reasons. Students were able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas despite missing these classes, provided they otherwise performed satisfactorily.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On January 3, shortly after the arrest of blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed on charges of apostasy, Abi Ould Ali, a businessman from Nouadhibou, called for his murder, placing a 4,000 euro (\$4,866) bounty on Ould Mohamed's head, according to local media outlets. For the next three weeks, the government remained silent in the face of street-corner fulminations and protest marches – some of which consisted of several thousand participants. Civil society groups, such as For a Green and Democratic Mauritania, that ventured remarks viewed as supportive of Ould Mohamed, were accused on social media of being “traitors to Islam.” On January 26, a Mauritanian defense attorney offered his services to Ould Mohamed. Within days, intimidating public protests – one of which ended in vandalism of shops owned by the employer of the attorney's sons – forced him to withdraw his offer. By the time of his trial, however, Ould Mohamed was assigned court-appointed counsel.

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On June 5, Yadhieh Ould Dahi, leader of a Salafist group called Ahbab Errassoul (Friends of the Prophet), issued what he called a fatwa of death against Aminetou Mint Moctar, a renowned human rights activist. Ould Dahi's declaration followed a French-language interview with Mint Moctar in which she advocated a fair trial for Ould Mohamed and labeled him a "prisoner of conscience." Authorities declined Mint Moctar's request for police protection, advising her to resolve her differences through dialogue, but placed Ould Dahi in police custody in late December. The country's largest Islamist party issued a disavowal of Ould Dahi's fatwa.

On September 23, local press outlets reported seven citizens met to create an "atheist's club." The group's purported mission was to defend freedom of religion. The government did not comment publicly on this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives, including the former Charge d'Affaires and the current Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials. On multiple occasions in June and July, embassy officers urged government officials from the Ministries of Justice, Interior and Decentralization, and Foreign Affairs and Cooperation to condemn Ahbab Errassoul's fatwa against Aminetou Mint Moctar. The embassy also issued a public statement in support of a local human rights consortium that had publicly defended Mint Moctar.

The embassy arranged for an imam to travel to the United States in November and December to participate in an official exchange program to promote religious tolerance. The Charge d'Affaires also hosted an iftar for approximately 20 imams and religious scholars, where she underscored the importance of religious tolerance and interfaith understanding.