

MAURITANIA 2015 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. A blogger charged with apostasy and sentenced to death, Mohammad Ould MKheytir, remained in jail pending an appeal. After protesters called for the death of a prominent human rights activist who publicly defended MKheytir, authorities issued an arrest warrant for the leader of the protests but did not arrest him. In April a Mauritanian blogger resident in the United States caused public protests in Mauritania over a posting deemed to have been offensive to the Prophet Mohammad. The government's High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals called on authorities to give the blogger the "legitimate punishment." The authorities also continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups to combat extremism, radicalization, and terrorism through a series of workshops in all 15 provinces.

Protestors threatened bodily injury to the attorney who defended MKheytir and destroyed the business products associated with the lawyer's family interests. In March, demonstrators in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott demanded the death penalty for the accused. His lawyer refused to defend him on appeal due to the pressure and threats. Protesters also threatened another human rights defender who offered to take MKheytir's appeal.

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, as well as senior visiting U.S. government officials, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the president and prime minister, on multiple occasions. The embassy raised the MKheytir case with authorities multiple times. On August 19-20, the embassy cohosted with the government a regional summit focused on countering violent extremism, a key element of which was an examination of the positive role religion could and should play in promoting societal inclusion and equality.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.6 million (July 2015 estimate). Nearly all are Sunni Muslims. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews, almost all of whom are foreigners.

MAURITANIA

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.

The law and legal procedures 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 government does not register religious groups, but all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of Interior. 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 government appoints the six imams of the High Council of Islam, who advise the government on conformity of legislation to Islamic precepts. The government also appoints the High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals, which has sole authority to regulate fatwa issuance and resolve related disputes among citizens and between citizens and public agencies.

MAURITANIA

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. Religious instruction in Arabic is required for students seeking the baccalaureate.

Government Practices

Mohammad Cheikh Ould Mohammad (better known as “MKheytir”) remained in prison under sentence of death following his December 2014 conviction for apostasy. An appeals court accepted his application for an appeal, but the court had not scheduled a hearing date as of the end of the year. MKheytir had published an online article the government said criticized the Prophet Mohammad and implicitly blamed the nation’s religious establishment for the plight of the country’s *forgeron* (blacksmith) caste, which traditionally has suffered discrimination. MKheytir’s lawyer stated that the case has lacked due process, but also said that the delay in his appeal hearing was still within legal norms. Protesters called for the death of the prominent human rights activist who defended MKheytir, Aminetou Mint El Moctar. Authorities issued an arrest warrant for the leader of the protests, Yahdih Ould Dahi, but did not arrest him.

In April a Mauritanian citizen and U.S. resident sparked public protests for a blog posting deemed to have been offensive to the Prophet Mohammad. In May the government’s High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals called on the competent authorities to apply the “legitimate punishment” to the individual. In its statement, the High Council said that it “deplores and condemns” his articles and reiterated its calls to punish “this apostate and his ilk” who offend Islam.

Although there is no specific legal prohibition against non-Muslims proselytizing, in practice the government prohibited such activity through the broad interpretation of the constitution stating Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the state. Authorized churches were able to conduct services within their premises, but could not proselytize publicly. No public expression of religion except Islam was allowed.

An unofficial government requirement restricted non-Muslims worship to the few recognized Christian churches. There were Roman Catholic and other Christian

MAURITANIA

churches in Nouakchott, Kaedi, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Mauritanian citizens were not allowed to attend non-Islamic religious services, which were restricted to foreigners.

The government continued to prohibit printing and distributing non-Islamic religious materials, but possession of these materials remained legal. In January the Gendarmerie arrested six South Korean expatriates for distributing the Bible in Gorgol province. In July individuals who said they were Egyptian nationals distributed copies of the Bible in Nouakchott, which resulted in complaints to local police. The authorities took no actions against either the South Korean or the Egyptian nationals.

In May a local association to combat extremism among youth groups organized an awareness campaign in the capital under the auspices of the Ministry of Youth and Sports to discuss the phenomenon of religious extremism among young people.

The government continued to provide funding to mosques and Islamic schools.

The government maintained a Quranic television channel and a Quranic radio station. Both stations sponsored regular programming on themes of moderation in Islam.

The government paid monthly salaries of 50,000 ougiya (\$152) 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 (\$76-\$303) to 30 members of the National Union of Mauritanian Imams, an authority established to regulate the relationship between the religious community and the MIATE.

Islamic classes remained part of the educational curriculum, but the results in these classes did not count significantly in the national exams that determine further placement. Additionally, many students reportedly did not attend these religious classes for various ethnolinguistic, religious, and personal reasons. Students were able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas despite missing these classes, provided they performed otherwise satisfactorily in other mandatory subjects. In August the Ministry of National Education and the MIATE reaffirmed the importance of the Islamic education program at the secondary level; the ministries stated the government considered religious education a tool to protect children and society against extremism and to promote Islamic culture.

MAURITANIA

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In March demonstrators in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott demanded the death penalty for MKheytir, the blogger convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death. Although Mkheytir was assigned court-appointed counsel for his trial in 2014, his lawyer refused to handle his appeal following protestors' death threats and damages to his family investments. Protestors in Nouakchott attacked a phone store and burned Samsung phones because the storeowner, the representative of Samsung in the country, was the son of the lawyer. Protestors also burned thousands of milk cans from a company owned by the lawyer's family. Protesters threatened another human rights defender who offered to take MKheytir's appeal. In June the President of the Mauritanian Association for Human Rights announced she would defend MKheytir before the Appeal Court.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, as well as senior visiting U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance with senior government officials, including the president and prime minister, on multiple occasions. Embassy representatives raised the MKheytir case with justice authorities in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou several times. In August the embassy cohosted with the government a regional summit focused on countering violent extremism, of which a key element examined the positive role local imams could and should play in promoting societal inclusion and equality.

The embassy arranged for an imam to travel to the United States in December to participate in an official exchange program to promote interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador met regularly with representatives of the religious community to discuss religious tolerance. He also hosted an iftar for approximately 40 imams and religious scholars, where he underscored the importance of religious tolerance and interfaith understanding.