

UNION OF THE COMOROS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution specifies Islam is the state religion but proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all regardless of religious belief. A law establishes Sunni Islam under the Shafi'i doctrine as the "official religious reference." Proselytizing for any religion except Sunni Islam is illegal, and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The law prohibits the performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places on the basis of "affronting society's cohesion and endangering national unity." National leaders explicitly condoned harassment, primarily against individuals practicing non-Sunni forms of Islam. President Azali Assoumani, wearing a national address, said that non-majority Muslim practices would not be tolerated and would be subject to severe sanction, and Moustoidrane Abdou, one of the country's vice presidents, said, "We will completely eradicate Shiism from the country." Government forces expropriated and partly demolished an Ahmadi Muslim mosque, and with the help of the local population, completely destroyed a Shia mosque. A court sentenced 26 individuals on Grande Comore to between six and 12 months of prison, in addition to fines, for celebrating Eid al-Adha one day early; they were pardoned by the president one week later. Members of minority Muslim groups were the subject of harassment and discrimination by government officials. The government arrested and jailed Muslims for violating Ramadan restrictions and prevented Muslims from worshipping in their mosques of choice. The Prefect of Mutsamudu, a representative of the presidency in Anjouan, and a representative of the Council of Ulema signed a decree stipulating that the opening of mosques without prior approval by the Muftiate and the Council of Ulema would be punishable by law, and suspending all Friday prayers in conflict with majority religious practices.

There continued to be reports that communities unofficially shunned individuals who were suspected of converting from Islam to Christianity. There were reports of societal abuse and discrimination against non-Shafi'i Sunni Muslim citizens. Both citizens and noncitizens reportedly faced pressure to practice elements of Islam, particularly during Ramadan. A Shia Muslim in Koni-Djodjo told a journalist that his family received death threats from other local residents, and that gendarmes made several threatening phone calls.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom.

The U.S. Ambassador discussed religious freedom and the seizure of an Ahmadi mosque with President Azali. Other embassy officials conveyed their concern and alarm concerning the increasing harassment of religious minorities with the minister of justice, the minister of interior, the commander of the gendarmerie, the governors of Anjouan and Moheli, and the mayors of the major cities. In August the embassy hosted a visiting speaker for a week to meet with religious, political, and civil society leaders to discuss countering extremism through economic empowerment. Embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom with religious and civil society leaders and others, including members of minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 808,000 (July 2017 estimate), of which 98 percent is Sunni Muslim. Roman Catholics, Shia, Sufi, and Ahmadi Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants together make up less than 2 percent of the population. Non-Muslims are mainly foreign residents and are concentrated in the country's capital, Moroni, and the capital of Anjouan, Mutsamudu. Shia and Ahmadi Muslims mostly live in Anjouan.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states Islam is the state religion and citizens shall draw the state's governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. It proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all individuals regardless of religion or belief. A law establishes the Sunni Shafi'i doctrine as the "official religious reference" and provides sanctions of five months to one year imprisonment and/or a fine of 100,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs (\$240 to \$1,200) for campaigns, propaganda, or religious practices or customs in public places that could cause social unrest or undermine national cohesion.

Proselytizing for any religion except Sunni Islam is illegal, and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The penal code states "whoever discloses, spreads, and teaches Muslims a religion other than Islam will be punished with imprisonment of three months to one year and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs" (\$120 to \$1,200).

There is no official registration for religious groups. The law allows Sunni religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy, and assemble for peaceful religious activities. It does not allow non-Sunni religious groups to assemble for peaceful religious activities in public places.

The law prohibits proselytizing or performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places, based on “affronting society’s cohesion and endangering national unity.” Without specifying religion, the penal code provides penalties for the profaning of any spaces designated for worship, interfering with the delivery of religious leaders in the performance of their duties, or in cases where the practice of sorcery, magic, or charlatanism interferes with public order.

By law, the president nominates the grand mufti, the senior Muslim cleric who is part of the government and manages issues concerning religion and religious administration. The grand mufti heads an independent government institution called the Supreme National Institution in Charge of Religious Practices in the Union of the Comoros. The grand mufti counsels the government on matters concerning the practice of Islam and Islamic law. The grand mufti chairs and periodically consults with the Council of Ulema, a group of religious elders cited in the constitution, to assess whether citizens are respecting the principles of Islam.

The law provides that before the month of Ramadan, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Council of Ulema publish a ministerial decree providing instructions to the population for that month.

The government uses the Quran in public primary schools for Arabic reading instruction. There are more than 200 government-supported, fee-based schools with Quranic instruction. The tenets of Islam are sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public and private schools at the middle school and high school levels.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government issued decrees restricting the practice of Islam and jailed people for violating these decrees or other Islamic guidelines. The government prevented non-Shafi’i Sunni Muslim groups from attending or establishing their own mosques, and seized, damaged or destroyed mosques of minority Muslim groups.

The president and other national leaders condoned the harassment of non-Shafi'i Sunnis, particularly Shia, in public statements.

On September 1, gendarmes arrested 28 persons, including several imams and their followers, on Grande Comore for violating the grand mufti's guidance declaring Eid al-Adha to be on September 2 rather than the day prior as it was celebrated elsewhere. According to observers, the decree had been issued for political reasons, including to discredit a presidential contender who, in a previous term, had decreed the holiday should be observed on the same day as in Mecca. A court found 26 of the 28 individuals guilty and sentenced them to varying terms of imprisonment and also imposed fines. The imams received 12-month prison terms, two without parole and a 250,000 Comorian francs (\$610) fine. Those who followed their imams' guidance received a six-month sentence, one without parole, and a 100,000 Comorian francs fine (\$240). A week later, President Azali pardoned them all.

In late January gendarmes on Anjouan prevented so-called "*Djawulas*" (a cleric from the group rejected the label and said they call themselves Sunni Muslims), a Muslim group that holds a more literal view of Islam than the majority, from worshipping at their local mosque. A cleric from the group said they were forbidden from establishing their own mosques and that three other "*Djawulas*" had been arrested days earlier for violating a presidential ban against their religious observance and were serving a one-year prison sentence. Multiple sources reported the arrests, but the specific charges could not be independently verified.

The government banned alcohol consumption and daytime swimming during Ramadan, which the police enforced. Authorities arrested Muslims in Fomboni, on Moheli, and in Mutsamudu, on Anjouan, for eating, and eating and smoking, respectively. According to press reporting, they received sentences of between one and five years in prison.

On October 30, the Council of Ulema on Anjouan sent a letter to the Prefect of Nyumakele prohibiting a local group of Muslims calling themselves the "*Ahl As-Sounna wal Jamaa*" from conducting Friday prayers in their own mosque, apart from the community's existing, state-approved "Friday mosques."

Christians reported they were pressured to fast during Ramadan, including by police officials, and forbidden from openly wearing religious symbols such as crucifixes. Local Christians said they practiced their faith secretly to avoid harassment by government officials or members of their communities.

On January 30, the Prefect of Mutsamudu, as well as a representative of the presidency in Anjouan and a representative of the Council of Ulema, signed a decree stating that the increasing number of religious groups was creating conflict and discord and noting that religion was a “prerogative” of the president. The decree stipulated that the opening of mosques without prior approval by the Muftiate and the Council of Ulema would be punishable by law, and it suspended all Friday prayers in conflict with majority religious practices.

During a July 6 national day speech, President Azali equated the “recent rise of Shiism” with “fringe extremist sects.” While acknowledging the constitution’s guarantee of freedom of worship, he said “any practice other than [Shafi’i Sunni Islam] which undermines national cohesion will not be tolerated and will be severely sanctioned.”

In a press interview published on September 25, Moustoidrane Abdou, one of the country’s three vice presidents, responded to a question about increasing pressure on religious minorities by equating Shia Islam with outside influence, and said, “We will completely eradicate Shiism from the country.”

On January 8, the minister of the interior ordered the seizure and partial demolition of the country’s first Ahmadi mosque, in Mutsamudu, on Anjouan, because it was deemed to undermine public order. He prevented its inauguration in October 2016, closed the mosque in November 2016, and in January ordered its expropriation, the destruction of its minarets, and its conversion into a police station.

On August 23, government forces destroyed a Shia mosque in Koni-Djodjo on Anjouan with the help of the local population.

The grand mufti continued to regularly address the country on the radio, applying Islamic principles to social issues such as delinquency, alcohol abuse, marriage, divorce, and education.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

As in previous years, there were reports that communities unofficially shunned individuals suspected of converting from Islam to Christianity. Societal abuse and discrimination against non-Muslim citizens persisted, particularly against Christians or those who were converts from Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners reported little to no discrimination.

In August a Shia Muslim in Koni-Djodjo told a journalist that his family received death threats from other local inhabitants, and that gendarmes had made several threatening phone calls.

According to the Comorian Press Agency, on June 21 an event was held at the National Documentation and Scientific Research Center under the theme “Sunnism and Shiism: Convergences to Divergences.” The report said the event was designed as a debate with Sunni and Shia participation, but only Sunni Muslims were speakers.

Observers stated that all citizens faced pressure from fellow citizens to practice elements of Islam, and this pressure was extended to noncitizens during Ramadan. Most societal pressure and discrimination reportedly occurred behind closed doors at the village level. The extent of de facto discrimination typically depended on the level of involvement of local Islamic teachers. Most non-Muslim citizens reportedly did not openly practice their faith for fear of societal rejection. Persons who raised their children with non-Muslim religious teachings said they faced societal discrimination. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to restrict the use of the country's three churches to noncitizens.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom. The U.S. Ambassador discussed religious freedom and the seizure of an Ahmadi mosque with President Azali. An article published the day after the meeting quoted the president's office saying, “the only form of Islamic practice President Azali will allow is the Sunni of ‘*Ahli Sunna waldjamaa*,” referring to the practices of the majority. Other embassy officials met with the minister of justice, the minister of interior, the commander of the gendarmerie, the Governors of Anjouan and Moheli, and the mayors of the major cities to discuss the situation of religious minorities and to express their concern and alarm regarding the increasing harassment of religious minorities.

In August the embassy hosted an imam for a week to discuss countering extremism through economic empowerment. The visiting imam met with religious, political, and civil society leaders to address religious tolerance through economic development in the country.

Embassy officers met with a wide variety of Muslim and Christian religious and civil society leaders on issues of religious freedom.