

UNION OF THE COMOROS 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution specifies Islam is the state religion and defines the national identity as being based on a single religion – Sunni Islam – but proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all, regardless of religious belief. The constitution also specifies that the principles and rules to regulate worship and social life be based on Sunni Islam under the Shafi'i doctrine. 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.” On May 10, security forces arrested between 30 and 40 Shia Muslims under suspicion of having engaged in non-Sunni group worship. According to media, police released them later that day because they were all foreigners and, as non-Comorians, were not required to conform to the state religion. The interior minister stated to U.S. officials that freedom of religion exists only for foreigners and that Comorians can be only Sunni Muslim. There were no reports of arrests for Comorians practicing other religions, but members of non-Sunni groups reported broad self-censorship and stated they practiced or spoke about their beliefs only in private. Shia reported government surveillance during religious holidays important to their community and stated airport customs officials confiscated items connected to Shia Islam. National leaders explicitly condoned harassment against individuals practicing non-Sunni forms of Islam. In October President Azali Assoumani stated in a speech that Shia cannot be Comorians and instructed communities to tell any Shia to renounce their faith or leave the country.

There continued to be reports that local communities unofficially shunned individuals who were suspected of converting from Islam to Christianity or from Sunni to Shia Islam.

Representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar, engaged on issues of religious freedom with government officials, including the minister of interior, the foreign minister, the office of the grand mufti, the secretary general of the Ministry of Justice, and the Human Rights Commission. Visiting Department of State and embassy officials raised concerns about discriminatory and intolerant statements by the president and other senior officials regarding Shia and other minorities. They also expressed concern about the ability of minorities to gather

and to maintain places of worship. Embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom with religious and civil society leaders and others, including members of minority religious groups.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Comoros on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 834,000 (midyear 2019 estimate), of which 98 percent is Sunni Muslim. Roman Catholics, Shia Muslims, Sufi Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, 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 principles and rules to regulate worship and social life from the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. The preamble "affirms the will of the Comorian people" to cultivate a national identity based on a single religion, Sunni Islam. 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's imprisonment, a fine of 100,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs (\$230-\$1,100), or both 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" (\$110-\$1,100).

There is no official registration process 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, although foreigners are permitted to pray at two Christian churches in Moroni and Mutsamudu, and foreign Shia are permitted to pray at a Shia mosque in Moroni.

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, for 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 appoints 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 and high school levels. Religious education is not mandatory.

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

Government Practices

On May 10, security forces under the control of Interior Minister Mohamed Daoudou arrested between 30 and 40 Shia Muslims under suspicion of having

engaged in group worship not conforming to the state-endorsed version of Sunni Islam and confiscated religious materials. According to media, most, if not all, of the worshippers were foreigners believed to be of Indian or Pakistani descent, who had been conducting Friday prayers in a private residence that had been partly converted into a mosque. Press stated that national police pulled the worshippers onto the street still barefoot and arrested them. The police reportedly released them later that day because they were all foreigners, and as non-Comorians, were not required to conform to the state religion.

Government officials stated to U.S. officials that the law prohibited Comorians from being Shia, and the interior minister said religious freedom does not exist for Comorians despite the constitutional provision providing for the freedom of religion. The minister stated the provision regarding freedom of religion applied only to foreigners and that all Comorians must be Sunni Muslim. Other government officials also said that foreigners were free to practice any religion they wished but citizens were obliged to practice only Shafi'i Sunni Islam in public or otherwise leave the country. National leaders publicly condoned harassment against individuals practicing non-Sunni forms of Islam. In October President Azali stated in a speech that Shia could not be Comorians and instructed communities to tell Shia Muslims to renounce their faith or leave the country.

There were no reports of arrests of citizens engaged in other religious practices during the year, but members of non-Sunni groups and other minority religious groups reported self-censorship and stated they practiced only in private to avoid being harassed by the government. Shia community members reported government surveillance during religious commemorations important to their community such as Ashura and stated customs officials confiscated items connected to Shia Islam at the airport.

The government did not implement an identity card system for imams and preachers that the interior minister announced in 2018, and the Ministry of Justice stated the interior minister's decree did not have the force of law nor was it a government regulation.

Expatriate Christian community members reported they had been waiting for more than two years for a government response to their application for a license to build a new church.

Interior Minister Daoudou issued Ramadan-related and other religious guidance. On May 9, he announced the national championship for the country's premier

soccer division would be postponed until after Ramadan. According to press reports, the minister of sports learned about the decision from reading about it in the press and noted the championship had been scheduled during Ramadan to abide by timelines required for the eventual participation in international competition. When the interior minister was questioned about the decision, he asked, “Would you prefer that the players not observe the fast? We are in a Muslim country and nothing is above religion.” He added that an investigation would be opened to determine how the decision to hold the championship during Ramadan had come about.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

As in previous years, there were reports that local 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.

Most non-Sunni Muslim citizens reportedly did not openly practice their faith for fear of societal rejection. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to restrict the use of the country’s three churches to noncitizens. Christians reported they would not eat publicly during Ramadan so as not to draw attention to their faith.

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 Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom. Visiting officials from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom and embassy personnel raised concerns about discriminatory and intolerant statements by the president and other senior officials regarding Shia Muslims and other minorities and restrictions on the ability of minorities to gather and to maintain places of worship in meetings with the minister of interior, foreign minister, office of the grand mufti, secretary general of the Ministry of Justice, and Human Rights Commission.

Embassy officers met with a wide variety of Muslim and Christian religious and civil society leaders on issues of religious freedom, including Ahmadi, Shia, Sunni, and Sufi Muslims, and Protestant and Catholic groups.

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