

UNION OF THE COMOROS 2020 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 August 28, security forces, under orders from Interior Minister Mohamed Daoudou, arrested seven persons on Anjouan and four persons on Grande Comore for engaging in the public Shia commemoration of Ashura. The gendarmerie released the 11 individuals after four days of detention. 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 Muslims reported government surveillance during religious holidays important to their community. In contrast with previous years, there were no reports of national leaders making public statements against religious minorities.

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 officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, and President’s Office, focusing on the importance of individuals having the ability to practice their religion freely and of government officials refraining from statements criticizing religious minorities. Embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom with religious and civil society leaders and others, including members of minority religious groups.

On December 2, 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 846,000 (midyear 2020 estimate), of which 98 percent is Sunni Muslim. Roman Catholics, Shia 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 (\$250-\$1,200), or both, for campaigns, propaganda, or religious practices or customs in public places that could cause social unrest or undermine national cohesion.

The law prohibits anyone from insulting a minister of religion in the exercise of his functions, punishable by a fine of 15,000 to 45,000 francs (\$37-\$110) and imprisonment of six months to two years.

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-\$1,200).

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 worship at three Christian churches in Moroni, Mutsamudu, and Moheli, and foreign Shia Muslims are permitted to worship 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.

According to the constitution, the Grand Mufti is the highest religious authority in the country. The President appoints the Grand Mufti, who 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 August 28, security forces, operating on orders from Interior Minister Mohamed Daoudou, arrested seven Shia Muslims on Anjouan and four on Grande Comore for commemorating Ashura in public. According to a local Shia leader,

the gendarmerie released the 11 individuals after four days of detention. Shia community members reported government surveillance during religious commemorations important to their community such as Ashura.

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.

According to a Shia leader in Moroni, a cultural center operated in Moroni, on Grande Comore, where Shia practiced their religion, but where police also intervened on Ashura and arrested Comorians attending.

In contrast with previous years, there were no reports of national leaders making public statements against religious minorities.

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

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 engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom, including with officials from the Foreign Ministry, Interior Ministry, Justice Ministry, and the President's Office, focusing on the importance

of individuals to be able to practice their religion freely and ending government statements criticizing religious minorities.

Embassy representatives met with a variety of Muslim and Christian religious and civil society leaders on issues of religious freedom, including Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadi Muslims and Protestant and Catholic groups. The embassy also used social media posts to highlight the importance of religious freedom and diversity and to engage with civil society and the general populace, including a post from the Ambassador on Thanksgiving to underscore the importance of religious diversity and interfaith cooperation.

On December 2, 2020, 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.