

# MAURITANIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Islam as the sole religion of the citizenry and state. The law prohibits blasphemy and apostasy and defines them as crimes punishable by death; however, the government has never applied this penalty for those crimes. On January 11, the parliament adopted a law on associations making it easier for NGOs, including faith-based organizations, to register and operate in the country. On November 9, the parliament approved a law protecting state symbols, reinforcing existing law that speech deemed to be insulting to Islam is a criminal offense and criminalizing the use of digital media deemed to insult Islam. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (MIATE) continued to collaborate with independent Muslim religious groups as well as with international partners to combat what it termed threats of extremism, radicalization, and terrorism, primarily through workshops promoting moderate Islam throughout the country. The government also collaborated with the Association of Mauritanian *Ulemas* (religious scholars) throughout the year to fight the spread of COVID-19.

During the year, there were calls for increased application of the country's sharia-based criminal code. For example, on April 21, many social media users criticized a video program on social media after a young woman was featured in an interview discussing premarital sex and why it was wrong to objectify women. Following the interview, numerous individuals on social media called for the program participants' arrest and prosecution under the country's sharia criminal code. Authorities detained the four participants on April 23 but released them without charges on April 27.

U.S. embassy officials raised apostasy, blasphemy, and other religious freedom issues with authorities on multiple occasions. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the Minister of Interior, Minister of Islamic Affairs, and Minister of Justice. Embassy staff also met with senior members of the Islamist opposition Tawassoul Party to discuss political and social issues, including religious freedom. Embassy officials also worked closely with MIATE on programs to promote religious tolerance among the country's religious scholars. The embassy promoted messages of religious freedom on its social media platforms in English, French,

and Arabic, including one to celebrate International Religious Freedom Day on October 27.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.1 million (midyear 2021). According to Mauritanian government estimates, Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 99 percent of the population. Unofficial estimates indicate Sunni Muslims are approximately 98 percent of the population, Shia Muslims 1 percent, and non-Muslims, mostly Christians and a small group of Jews, a further 1 percent. Almost all non-Muslims are noncitizens.

## **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 citizenry and the state. 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 relies on a combination of sharia and secular legal principles.

The law prohibits apostasy and blasphemy. The criminal code mandates a death sentence for any Muslim convicted of apostasy or blasphemy, but the government has never applied capital punishment for apostasy or blasphemy.

The penal code stipulates that the penalty for persons of any gender caught engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage is 100 lashes and imprisonment of up to one year. The penalty for married individuals convicted of adultery is death by stoning, although the last such stoning occurred more than 30 years ago. The penal code requires death by stoning for Muslim males convicted of consensual homosexual activity, but this penalty has not been imposed since 1984.

The government does not register Muslim religious groups. The law allows for non-Muslim religious groups to register and operate. On January 11, the National Assembly adopted a new law on associations (the “NGO law”) that changes the registration system from an authoritative system controlled by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to a declarative system in which NGOs are automatically granted authorization to operate 60 days after they submit their registration to authorities. Faith-based NGOs must also agree to refrain from proselytizing or otherwise

promoting any religion other than Islam. The law requires the MOI to authorize in advance all group meetings, including non-Islamic religious gatherings and those held in private homes. Groups must submit an application in advance for MOI approval.

By law, the 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 also appoints the High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals, which advises the government on conformity of legislation to Islamic precepts, and which 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.

Public schools and private secondary schools, but not international schools, are required to provide four hours of Islamic instruction per week. Religious instruction in Arabic is required for students seeking the baccalaureate.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On July 14, the Council of Ministers approved a draft law protecting state symbols. Among other measures, the new law reinforces existing law that speech deemed to insult Islam is a criminal offense. Specifically, the new law criminalizes digital media deemed to insult Islam, including the use of photos, social media, and video/audio recordings. On November 9, the parliament approved the law, and it went into effect by the end of the year.

According to government officials and civil society organizations, the new NGO law adopted in January makes it easier for NGOs, including faith-based organizations, to register and operate in the country. The government adopted the implementing decree for the NGO law on October 20, and several NGOs registered under the new provisions by the end of the year.

The possession of non-Islamic religious materials remained legal, although the government continued to prohibit their printing and distribution. The government

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

The government continued to forbid non-Muslims from proselytizing, although there was no specific legal prohibition. The government continued to ban any public expression of religion except that of Islam.

Authorized churches were able to conduct services within their premises but could not proselytize. An unofficial government requirement restricted non-Islamic worship to the few recognized Christian churches. There are Roman Catholic and other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Kaedi, Atar, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Non-Islamic religious services remained open only to foreigners – citizens could not attend. Some churches were not able to get authorization from the government, and this affected their ability to operate in the country. For example, some churches could not open a bank account in the church's name. Several international Christian NGOs reported they continued to operate successfully in the country. Although the MOI authorized few group meetings early in the year due to COVID-19 restrictions, more meeting requests were approved once the last of the restrictions were lifted in September, according to NGOs and MOI officials.

On March 11, President Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani met with the board of the Association of Mauritanian Ulemas. According to an official press statement, the President discussed ways to support religious leaders and collaborate on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the year, the government worked with the Association of Mauritanian Ulemas to stop the spread of the virus. The government collaborated with the association on messaging to encourage people to pray at home, wear masks, and get vaccinated.

During the year, the government continued to engage leaders of the Islamist movement in the country, and President Ghazouani met with both the current and former presidents of Tawassoul, the Islamist opposition party whose leaders stated they consider the party as promoting moderate and tolerant Islam. The MIATE continued to collaborate with independent Muslim religious groups, as well as with international partners, to combat what it termed threats of extremism, radicalization, and terrorism, primarily through workshops throughout the country. In November, the MIATE collaborated with religious scholars on workshops to promote moderate, tolerant Islam in the interior of the country.

The government continued to provide funding to mosques, Islamic schools and universities under its control, and the National Union of Imams. Through its

traditional education program, the government granted monthly salaries for 403 new teachers in *mahadras*, the commonly used national term for madrassahs. The program targeted impoverished areas to reduce educational and social disparity.

Islamic classes remained part of the educational curriculum for non-international schools, but class attendance was not mandatory and not required for graduation. Academic results in Islamic classes did not count significantly in the national exams that determined further placement. Many students reportedly did not attend these classes for various ethnolinguistic, religious, and personal reasons. The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, Technical and Vocational Training, and National Education Reform and the MIATE continued to reaffirm the importance of the Islamic education program at the secondary level as a means of promoting Islamic culture and combating religious extremism.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On April 21, many on social media criticized and threatened four persons who participated in a video program called *Al-Matrush* (a local expression meaning “the intrusive”). During the program, a young woman challenged existing religious norms and talked openly about premarital sex, what women should look for in a partner, and why it was wrong to objectify women. Many in the public called for the four participants to be arrested and tried under the country’s sharia-based criminal code. Authorities detained the four participants on April 24, but the prosecutor decided not to file charges, and the four were released on April 27. Program organizers halted production in response to police warnings and societal pressure and the program had not restarted by the end of the year.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the Minister of Interior, Minister of Justice, and Minister of Islamic Affairs. Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with other government officials as well, including when the four individuals were detained for participating in the *Al-Matrush* program. Embassy representatives also raised the issues of blasphemy and apostasy with government officials.

Embassy officials met with senior members of the Islamist opposition, Tawassoul, to discuss political and social issues, including religious freedom. On several occasions, the Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss issues related to

religious tolerance, such as the importance of allowing non-Islamic religious groups to register and open official bank accounts in the country. Visiting U.S. officials also raised the importance of religious tolerance with a range of societal groups.

Embassy representatives frequently met with MIATE officials to design and implement programs to promote religious tolerance. On October 27, the Ambassador launched an \$800,000 multiyear program with World Vision and MIATE which will work with religious community leaders to promote tolerance and fight against violent extremism related to religion. Under the program, imams will work with MIATE to review school curricula to ensure classrooms are promoting tolerance; another program element includes work with women leaders to launch an anti-extremism communication campaign.

The embassy used social media to share religious freedom posts in English, French, and Arabic, including on International Religious Freedom Day on October 27.