

UNION OF THE COMOROS 2022 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 that 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.”

There were no reports of arrests for Comorians engaging in other religious practices, but members of non-Sunni groups reported broad self-censorship and stated they practiced their beliefs only in private. Shia Muslims continued to report limited government surveillance during major religious holidays. For the third consecutive year, there were no reports of national leaders making public statements against religious minorities. Multiple religious minority group leaders said that 2022 had been “quiet and peaceful” and again attributed the government’s relative restraint to engagement from the United States and others on religious freedom issues. Private Shia commemorations of all Eid holidays, Ramadan, and Ashura proceeded peacefully on the three islands. Shia Muslims on Anjouan said that local authorities continued to prevent them from practicing in the Shia mosque that had existed on the island for several years; they were forced to worship in a Shia community center instead.

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, (which is accredited to Comoros) engaged on issues of religious freedom with government officials, including the president and officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Justice, focusing on the importance of individuals having the ability to practice their religion freely and of government officials refraining from statements criticizing religious minorities. During the December U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, D.C., the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with a delegation of senior Comorian government officials to discuss the status of freedom of religion or belief in the country. Embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom with religious and civil society leaders and others, including members of minority religious groups.

On November 30, 2022, 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 876,437 (midyear 2022), 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 on the island of 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. In addition to the constitution, 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 (\$217-1,100), 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 50,000 to 150,000 francs (\$108-325), and it provides that anyone who strikes or assaults a minister of religion in the exercise of his function will be punished with imprisonment of one to five years.

Proselytizing for any religion except Sunni Islam is illegal, and the law provides for the 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” (\$108-1,100). The law also states, “The sale [or] the free distribution to Muslims of books, brochures, magazines, records and cassettes or any other media teaching a religion other than Islam” will be punished with the same penalties.

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 the performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places, to avoid “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 religious leaders in the performance of their duties, or in cases where the practice of sorcery, magic, or charlatanism interferes with public order. The new penal code, adopted in February, provides a penalty from one to six months imprisonment and a fine of 150,000 to 750,000 francs (\$325-\$1,600) for those offenses.

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

The government uses the Quran in public primary schools for Arabic reading instruction. There are more than 200 fee-based schools with Quranic instruction that also receive some support from the government. The tenets of Islam are taught in conjunction with Arabic in public and private schools at the middle and high school levels. A new education law adopted in May provides that “pre-elementary education (for ages three to five years) aims at acquiring the first elements of the Muslim religion,” including two years of initiation and familiarization with cultural values and the Muslim religion.

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

Government Practices

Shia leaders stated that 2022 was “quiet and peaceful” and that recent years had been unlike the turbulent years 2017 and 2018 when relations between Sunni and Shia countries in the Middle East were especially tense (i.e., Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies versus Iran and its predominantly Sunni ally Qatar). Private Shia commemorations of all Eid holidays, Ramadan, and Ashura were allowed to proceed and did so peacefully on all three islands. Shia followers practiced their religion and celebrated their holidays in private homes or community centers without interference of the government.

Shia Muslims continued to report government surveillance during major religious holidays. For the third consecutive year, the president and other political leaders refrained from making public statements against religious minorities. One religious minority group leader attributed the government’s relative restraint to sustained international engagement from the United States and others related to the issue.

During the year, there were no reports of any arrests of religious minorities, but members of Shia and other non-Sunni groups reported broad self-censorship and stated they practiced or spoke about their beliefs only in private. Shia and Ahmadi Muslims stated that they were not able to worship publicly and that government authorities sometimes attended religious gatherings held in private homes to monitor their practices but did not interfere.

Ahmadi Muslims stated the tract of land on the island of Anjouan that was the site of an Ahmadi mosque seized and destroyed by local authorities in 2017 had not been returned to them. Shia Muslims on Anjouan continued to state that local authorities prevented them from practicing in the Shia mosque that has existed on the island for several years. Instead, they were forced to worship in a Shia community center that only has a rooftop space for prayer, exposing them to the elements. Ahmadi and Shia Muslims on Anjouan stated they did not live in fear of immediate violence but needed to exercise caution and self-censorship in day-to-day activities to avoid attracting unwanted attention from local authorities.

The status of an application by expatriate Christian community members for a license to build a new nondenominational church was unclear, but most observers believed the application remained stalled. Community members previously reported they had been waiting for more than four years for a government response to their application.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were continued 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 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, and some Shia Muslims reported being harassed by Sunni Muslims. 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. The ambassador and representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Madagascar visited the country frequently and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom, including with the president and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Justice, focusing on the importance of religious tolerance and of individuals' being able to practice their religion freely.

During the December U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with a delegation of senior Comorian government officials, including Interior Minister Farqi Fakradine and Senior

Advisor to the President Nour Azali, to discuss the status of freedom of religion or belief in the country.

Embassy representatives met with a diverse group of Muslim and Christian religious and civil society leaders, including Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadi Muslims, on issues of religious freedom. 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.

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