

# MAURITANIA 2022 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 the death penalty for these crimes.

On April 25, police near the border town of Rosso detained a man after his son was found carrying Bibles and Christian materials from Senegal into the country. To protect his son, the man reportedly claimed that the Bibles and other materials belonged to him. An investigative judge in Rosso noted his intent to charge the man with *tartuffery* (concealing atheism or apostasy from Islam, while pretending to be a Muslim) – a charge that carries an automatic death sentence for those convicted. In July, the prosecutor delayed the case until the man applied for provisional release. On July 18, the Minister of Justice authorized his release, suspended his case, and released him.

During the year, some extremist and militant Islamist groups made public calls for increased application of the country's sharia-based criminal code. On May 26, police in Nouakchott detained six young LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, and intersex) persons after their neighbors filed a complaint that the group was disturbing public order and performing “unnatural acts” in violation of cultural and religious norms and against the sharia-based penal code. Rather than proceed with prosecution, authorities declined to file charges and released all six on May 28.

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 Traditional Education, 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 the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (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.

In February, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials and civil society organizations, including President Muhammad Ghazouani, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education, and Justice, as well as local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), youth leaders, and members of minority religious groups in the country. Throughout the meetings, the Ambassador discussed the need to promote peace and tolerance, protect religious minorities, pass the long-awaited, gender-based violence law, reform the country's laws criminalizing blasphemy and apostasy, and combat trafficking in persons, including hereditary slavery.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.2 million (midyear 2022). 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 by applying through both the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the MIATE, although there are no reports of any such groups having registered. In January 2021, the National Assembly adopted a new law on associations (the “NGO law”), signed into law by President Ghazouani in December 2021, that changed the registration system from an authoritative system controlled by the 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.

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 April 25, police near the town of Rosso on the border with Senegal detained a citizen of Mauritania, after his son was found bringing Bibles and Christian learning materials from Senegal into Mauritania. To protect his son, the father reportedly claimed that the Bibles and other materials belonged to him.

Immediately following the incident, a local investigative judge in Rosso noted his intent to charge the father with tartuffery (concealing atheism or apostasy from Islam, while pretending to be a Muslim) – a charge that carries an automatic death sentence for those convicted. In July, the prosecutor delayed the case until the father applied for provisional release. The Minister of Justice authorized the father's release on July 18, suspended his case, and confirmed his release on July 19. At year's end, the father and son both remained free.

In July 2021, the Council of Ministers approved a draft law protecting state symbols. Among other measures, the new law reinforces existing law that makes speech deemed an insult to Islam a criminal offense. Specifically, the new law criminalizes digital media deemed an insult to Islam, including the use of photos, social media, and video or audio recordings. In November 2021, the parliament approved the law, and it went into effect at the end of 2021.

According to government officials and civil society organizations, the 2021 NGO law made it easier for NGOs, including faith-based organizations, to register and operate in the country. The government adopted an implementing decree for the NGO law in October 2021, and the President promulgated it in December 2021. At year's end, more than two thousand NGOs had registered through the new process.

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 were Roman Catholic and other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Kaedi, Atar, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Non-Islamic religious services remained open only to foreigners, and citizens could not attend. Some Christian groups seeking to establish churches in the country were unable to obtain authorization from authorities, thus affecting their ability to operate and practice their religion in the country. Because of a lack of authorization, some churches could not open a bank account in their name. Non-Muslim religious leaders, however, stated the government typically does not prevent such groups from holding religious gatherings in private spaces.

Established churches sometimes faced difficulties importing religious materials for use during church services (i.e., Bibles, religious education books, and wafers and wine for communion). Several registered international Christian NGOs reported, however, that they continued to operate successfully in the country.

On March 14, President Ghazouani presided over the awards ceremony for the second edition of a competition for memorizing and understanding Quranic texts. The themes of the competition, organized in cooperation with the MIATE and the Association of the Mauritanian Ulemas, were evaluated by a jury composed of leading religious scholars of the country.

The MIATE continued to collaborate with independent Muslim religious groups, as well as with international partners, to combat what it termed the threats of extremism, radicalization, and terrorism, primarily through workshops throughout the country. In February, the President oversaw a Forum for Peace conference cohosted by the government and Abu Dhabi that brought together government leaders, religious scholars, and civil society from across Africa to discuss religion's role in building peace in the region.

On March 20, the Mauritanian branch of the Regional Cell for the Prevention of Radicalization and Countering Violent Extremism (CellRad in French), under the joint G5 Sahel counterterrorism regional framework, presented its communications strategy for countering violent extremism, approved in 2021. The document detailed a prevention program to promote community resilience to radical discourse, reinforce national capacity to prevent radicalization and

violent extremism, and improve social cohesion through the involvement of women and youth. The program also provides for an “early warning system” for violent extremism and an analysis of community vulnerability. The MIATE oversees the CellRad.

On May 24, the Mauritanian CellRad praised the government’s focus on supporting the work of 70 *murshidates* (female religious guides) from Sahelian countries and Morocco, who promoted antiradical discourse. The grassroots efforts, supported by the MIATE, increased the country’s efforts on training to sensitize populations at all levels (mosques, Quranic schools, vulnerable neighborhoods, etc.) and were a leading example of antiradicalization efforts.

On October 13, the secretary general of the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training launched a \$17 million (\$460,000) project to support youth. The goal of the five-year program was to increase the resistance of vulnerable youth to radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist organizations and to provide economic opportunities for them in the three regions of Nouakchott and in the Trarza, Hodh al-Gharbi, and Hodh Echargui regions.

In 2022, officials proposed creating a government body to regulate the collection and distribution of *zakat* (charity), which has thus far been managed locally and informally by mosques.

The government continued to provide funding to mosques, Islamic schools, and universities under its control as well as to the National Union of Imams. On January 27, Prime Minister Mohamed Ould Bilal declared to parliament that tools have been developed, including a methodological guide and a French-Arabic-Pulaar glossary of terms relating to the fight against terrorism and extremism, to counter the propagation of extremist religious discourse. The government renovated and equipped 36 mosques and distributed food aid to 1,000 other mosques. In addition, the government provided 1,200 imams and 400 muezzins (Muslims responsible for conducting the call to prayer), who were already receiving monthly salaries, with health insurance, and 3,900 others with annual subsidies.

As part of its strategy to support and develop traditional education in poorer areas, the government, through the MIATE, approved 326 new mahadras

(madrassahs or Islamic schools) and provided monthly salaries to their teachers. 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**

During the year, there were calls from the public for increased application of the country's sharia-based criminal code. On May 26, police in Nouakchott detained six young LGBTQI persons after their neighbors filed a complaint that the group was disturbing public order and performing "unnatural acts" in violation of cultural and religious norms and against the sharia-based penal code. Rather than proceed with prosecution, however, authorities declined to file charges and released all six individuals on May 28.

Civil society continued to report social inhibitions to challenging religious norms or discussing religious freedom and slavery. Some framed the ongoing practice of slavery as still acceptable, according to their religious beliefs. Some texts from the Maliki school of Islam the predominant school of Islamic teaching in the country – contain sections that were used to justify slavery practices.

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

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior, Minister of Justice, Minister of Employment, and Minister of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education. Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with other government officials as well, including raising

individual cases. 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. On February 7-9, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Nouakchott to attend the African Conference for Peace (also referred to as the “Making Peace for the World Conference”) and meet with government officials and civil society organizations. The government and the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace cohosted the conference, which aimed to bring together government leaders, religious scholars, and civil society from across Africa to discuss religion’s role in building peace in the region. During his visit, the Ambassador at Large met with President Ghazouani, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education, and Justice, local and international NGOs, youth leaders, and minority religious groups operating in the country. In his keynote address to the conference and throughout the meetings, the Ambassador at Large discussed the need to promote peace and tolerance, protect religious minorities, pass the proposed gender-based violence law, reform the country’s laws criminalizing blasphemy and apostasy, and combat trafficking in persons, including hereditary slavery.

Embassy representatives frequently met with MIATE officials to design and implement programs to promote religious tolerance. During his visit in February, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Ambassador met with Minister of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education Mohamed Dah Ould Sidi Ould Amar Taleb and other current and former officials and discussed the need to promote peace and tolerance, protect religious minorities, pass the gender-based violence law, reform the country’s laws criminalizing blasphemy, apostasy, and tartuffery, and combat slavery and human trafficking, including hereditary slavery. Minister Taleb underscored that Islam is a religion of tolerance and peace. He stated that the government ignores most incidents of blasphemy and apostasy in the country, particularly on Facebook and social media, but he stated that the government must act when specific cases gather



public attention. He also stressed that he is always promoting messages of peace, as he manages 7,000 religious scholars, 17,000 Quranic schools, and 15,000 mosques.

The embassy used social media to circulate religious freedom posts in English, French, and Arabic, including the Secretary of State's message on International Religious Freedom Day, October 27.