

UNION OF THE COMOROS 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution specifies that Sunni Islam is the state religion and defines the national identity as being based on a single religion 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.”

Members of non-Sunni groups reported broad self-censorship and stated they practiced their beliefs only in private. In a change from recent years, Shia Muslims did not report government surveillance during major religious holidays. Multiple religious minority group leaders said that there had been no incidents of religious violence or oppression during the year 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 due to political concerns involving the former president who built the mosque with help from Iran.

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. In other cases, local communities intervened to try and convince those changing their religious beliefs or practices to remain committed to Sunni Islam.

Representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar, engaged on issues of religious freedom with government officials, including the President and officials in multiple ministries. The representatives focused on the importance of individuals having the ability to practice their religion freely and of government officials refraining from statements criticizing religious minorities. In February, the U.S. Ambassador and Foreign Minister Dhoahir Dhoukmal signed the U.S.-Comoros Joint Statement on Cooperation in the presence of President Azali and the cabinet of ministers. The statement included language supporting a partnership underpinned by shared interests, including the rights to freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and religion or belief.

On December 29, 2023, 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 888,400 (midyear 2023), 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 live mostly 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 (\$230 to \$1,150), 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 (\$115 to \$345), 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” (\$115 to \$1,150). 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. 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 penal code provides a penalty from one to six months imprisonment and a fine of 150,000 to 750,000 francs (\$325 to \$1,725) 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. An education law adopted in 2022 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 the year was quiet and peaceful, unlike past turbulent years when relations between Sunni and Shia countries in the Middle East were especially tense. Private Shia commemorations of all Eid holidays, Ramadan, and Ashura were allowed to proceed and did so peacefully on the three islands. Shia followers practiced their religion and celebrated their holidays in private homes or community centers without government interference.

Unlike in previous years, Shia Muslims did not report any instances of government surveillance during celebrations of religious holidays. 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, members of Shia and other non-Sunni groups reported engaging in 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 reported that the authorities had still not returned 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. Shia Muslims on Anjouan reported that local authorities continued to prevent them from practicing in the Shia mosque due to political concerns involving the former president who built the mosque with help from Iran. Instead, they worshiped in a Shia community center that had only 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.

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. In some cases, local communities intervened to try and convince those changing their religious beliefs or

practices to remain committed to Sunni Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners reported little to no discrimination. Catholic churches on each island engaged in social work throughout the country.

Most non-Sunni Muslim citizens reportedly did not openly practice their faith due to fear of societal rejection, and some Shia Muslims reported being harassed by Sunni Muslims. Shia mosques on each island were largely frequented by individuals of Indo-Pakistani descent living in Comoros. 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 Antananarivo, Madagascar, engaged on issues of religious freedom with government officials, including the President and officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and 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.

In February, the U.S. Ambassador and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dhoihir Dhoulkamal signed the U.S.-Comoros Joint Statement on Cooperation in Comoros in the presence of President Azali and the full cabinet of ministers. The statement includes the following language: "We endeavor to build a partnership underpinned by shared interests, to promote tolerance and gender equality and women's empowerment, strengthen democratic institutions and processes that support free and fair elections, and protect

human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights to freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and religion or belief.”

In meetings throughout the year, the Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly raised religious freedom issues with the President, the President’s private counselor, and the Minister of Interior. Topics included officials’ concerns regarding radicalization and religious extremism. In addition, they discussed the country’s rejection of the most extreme strands of Islam that call for violence and ways to prevent their spread in Comorian society.

Embassy representatives met with a diverse group of Muslim and Christian religious and civil society leaders 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.

On December 29, 2023, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Comoros on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.