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## Comoros

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report**

Report

**September 13, 2011**

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections; however, Islam is the state religion, and the penal code prohibits proselytizing for religions other than Islam.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There continued to be societal discrimination against non-Muslim citizens, particularly Christians and those who converted from Islam.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 838 square miles and a population of 770,000. The population is 99 percent Sunni Muslim. There are several hundred foreigners on the islands, including Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, and Protestants.

A few foreign religious groups operated humanitarian programs; however, by agreement with the government, they did not engage in proselytizing.

#### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections; however, the constitution also states that citizens will draw governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. A constitutional referendum passed in May 2009 states "Islam is the state religion," but in practice there was no change in the legal status of religious freedom.

Proselytizing for any religion except Islam is illegal, and foreigners caught proselytizing for religions other than Islam were subject to deportation. Converts from Islam may be prosecuted under the law; however, such prosecutions were rare and have not resulted in any convictions in recent years.

Nominated by the president, the grand mufti is part of the government and manages issues concerning religion and religious administration. The grand mufti's position is attached to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and he counsels the government on matters of Islamic faith and Islamic law. The grand mufti periodically consulted with a group of elders to assess whether the principles of Islam were respected, and he regularly addressed the country on the radio regarding social and religious issues such as marriage, divorce, and education.

The government does not require religious groups to be licensed, registered, or officially recognized.

While the study of Islam is not compulsory in public schools, the tenets of Islam were sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public schools at the middle school level. There were no provisions for religious education of religious minorities in public schools; however, foreigners can request that their children not receive Islamic instruction or Arabic language training. Almost all children between the ages of four and seven attend schools to learn to recite and understand the Qur'an.

The government funded the country's only public university to assure the availability of local educational opportunities, in part due to concerns that youth who have studied abroad in countries with stricter Islamic traditions would return home and impose these traditions on their families and friends.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Kabir, and the Islamic New Year.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The government prohibited Christians from proselytizing.

Although the government allowed organized religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy to serve believers, and assemble for peaceful religious activities, most non-Muslim citizens did not openly practice their faith for fear of potential legal repercussions for proselytizing.

The government occasionally enforced bans on alcohol and immodest dress, particularly during Ramadan.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice .There continued to be societal discrimination against non-Muslim citizens, particularly Christians and those who converted from Islam. Non-Muslim citizens faced intense societal pressure to refrain from religious practice; however, non-Muslim foreigners encountered little to no discrimination. All citizens faced pressure to practice elements of Islam, particularly during Ramadan.

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Most societal pressure and discrimination occurred behind closed doors at the village level. In the past there were reports of family and community members excluding non-Muslim converts from schools or villages for "evangelizing Muslims." The extent of discrimination typically depended on the influence of local teachers of Islam. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to restrict the use of the country's three churches to noncitizens.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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