



## Comoros

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the Penal Code prohibits proselytizing for religions other than Islam. A constitutional referendum passed on May 17, 2009 states that "Islam is the state religion."

The Government prohibited Christians from proselytizing. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

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 732,000. Ninety-nine percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Foreigners living on the islands number several hundred and include Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, and Protestants.

A few foreign religious groups operate humanitarian programs, but by agreement with the Government, they do not engage in proselytizing.

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

##### Legal/Policy Framework

While the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, it also states that citizens will draw governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. Proselytizing for any religion except Islam is illegal, and converts from Islam may be prosecuted under the law. However, such prosecutions are rare and have not resulted in any convictions in recent years.

A constitutional referendum passed on May 17, 2009 states that "Islam is the state religion," but in practice there was no change in the legal status of religious freedom. Foreigners caught proselytizing for religions other than Islam are subject to deportation.

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 consults with a group of elders to assess whether the principles of Islam are respected, and he regularly addresses the country on the radio regarding social and religious issues such as marriage, divorce, and education.

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

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 are sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public schools at the middle school level. There are no provisions made for religious education for 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 funds the country's only public university to ensure the availability of local educational opportunities, and in part due to concerns that youth who have studied abroad in countries with stricter Islamic traditions will return home and impose these traditions on their families and friends.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government prohibited Christians from proselytizing. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

Although the Government allows 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 religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

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

There continued to be discrimination against non-Muslim citizens, particularly Christians and those who converted from Islam. Non-Muslim citizens face 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.

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;" however, no such incidents were recorded during this reporting period. The extent of de facto 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.

Government authorities closed the case of the April 2008 vandalism of the Church of Moroni after they were unable to determine who wrote obscene graffiti on the church's outer walls.

#### 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. To demonstrate support for religious pluralism, the Ambassador held a program for more than 100 students at the American Corner on "Islam in America," including a film and presentation on Muslim communities in the United States. Embassy officers frequently hold discussion group meetings on religious tolerance with religious leaders and other community members.

The Ambassador regularly raised the importance of religious freedom and concern over Islamic fundamentalism's impact on religious expression in meetings with government officials, including President Sambu. Embassy officers raised concern with the country's officials that prohibitions on religious conversion violated international human rights norms.