



Comoros

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the Penal Code prohibits conversion from Islam.

The Government occasionally limited religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. While authorities continued to prohibit Christians from proselytizing, there were no known instances where the authorities or societal actors restricted the right of Christians to practice other aspects of their faith.

Societal abuses and discrimination against non-Muslims existed; however, accounts were anecdotal. Muslims treated citizens who converted to Christianity more harshly than foreigners who practiced the faith. Some family and community members harassed citizens who joined non-Muslim faiths and chased them out of their schools and villages for "evangelizing Muslims."

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 711,000. Ninety-nine percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. There is no sharp divide between Sunni and Shi'a, and most Muslims respect the doctrinal differences between the two branches of Islam. Foreigners living on the islands number several hundred, and include Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of other Christian groups including Roman Catholics and Protestants.

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

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the Penal Code prohibits conversion from Islam. While the Constitution does not designate an official religion, it states that citizens will draw principles and rules that will govern the country from Islamic tenets.

The Constitution contains no legal restrictions to prevent Christians from attending church, and non citizen Christians are allowed to practice their faith without governmental intervention as long as they do not attempt to convert citizens. Foreigners caught proselytizing for religions other than Islam are subject to deportation.

While the law allows non-Muslims to practice their religion, it prohibits citizens from converting from Islam. The Constitution upholds religious freedom; however, the pre-existing Penal Code prohibits conversion from Islam and has yet to be modified to be consistent. Although enforceable, this law is rarely applied.

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.

While the study of Islam is not compulsory in public schools, the tenets of Islam are sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic language 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; attendance is not compulsory for religious minorities.

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

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government occasionally limited religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

The Government allows organized religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy to serve believers, and assemble for peaceful religious activities. However, most non-Muslim citizens did not openly practice their faith for fear of potential legal repercussions for proselytizing and societal pressure.

There were no reports of government sponsorship of speech or materials that foster intolerance or hatred toward any religious groups.

Government authorities prohibited non-Muslims from proselytizing. A law dating from the early 1980s states "whoever divulges, promotes, or teaches Muslims a religion other than Islam will be punished with a 3-month prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comoran Francs." However, in practice the Government did not impose this fine.

Bans on alcohol and immodest dress were enforced sporadically, usually during religious months, such as Ramadan.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On July 6, 2006, in a general amnesty decreed by the President, prisoners were released who had been arrested in the preceding 6 months. Among them were four citizens who were convicted of "evangelizing Muslims" for hosting Christian religious debates in a private residence.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Societal abuse and discrimination against non-Muslim citizens existed, particularly against Christians or those who were converts from Islam. 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 occurs behind closed doors at the village level. The extent of de facto discrimination typically depends on the level of involvement of local Islamic teachers. Most non-Muslim citizens did not openly practice their faith for fear of societal rejection. Persons who raise their children with non-Muslim religious teachings face societal

discrimination. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to restrict the use of the country's three churches to non-citizens.

On April 20, 2008, unknown persons wrote obscene words on the outer wall of the Protestant Church of Moroni. The graffiti, in broken French, expressed "hatred of Christians." Reverend Willy, head of the small Protestant community in the country, was shocked, but called it "an isolated act." He added, "We have been here for 40 years and never seen anything similar. We have never been worried about the practice of our religion." He expected Protestants to continue to be able to live peacefully in the country.

Community leaders near the church publicly expressed disappointment at this act of intolerance and demanded the police investigate. The Union National Assembly issued a statement May 28, 2008, condemning the act and calling on Union Government authorities to investigate and bring the perpetrators to justice. The police had not issued a report by the end of the reporting period.

On August 12, 2007, a Molotov cocktail attack by unknown assailants caused damage to a medical dispensary run by a Catholic charity on Grande Comore. The dispensary's director had previously received a threatening anti-Christian leaflet. Police conducted an inconclusive investigation and decided this was an isolated incident. Community leaders condemned the attack.

There is concern that Islamic fundamentalism is increasing as youth return home following Islamic studies abroad and seek to impose a stricter adherence to Islamic religious law on their family members and associates; in response, the Union Government has established a university to give students the option of remaining at home to further their education.

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. In speeches and in private conversations, the Ambassador and Embassy staff emphasize the importance of religious freedom.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador and Embassy officers met with Muslim and minority religious leaders and community members to discuss a variety of concerns, including women's issues, and the threat of students importing radical Islam learned while studying abroad.

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

Released on September 19, 2008

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

