

UNION OF THE COMOROS 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Islam is the state religion and the constitution states that citizens will draw governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Staff of the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar, traveled regularly to all three Comoran islands to engage government officials and citizens on bilateral issues and projects, and discussed religious freedom issues as part of an ongoing dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The World Bank estimates the population at 735,000. It is 99 percent Sunni Muslim. The several hundred non-Sunni residents include Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, and Protestants.

The very few non-Sunni places of worship include Shia mosques, a Hindu temple, and one Christian church on each of the three islands. The best known is the Catholic Church in Moroni, for which the surrounding "Quartier du Cathedral" neighborhood is named. Its parishioners are nearly entirely foreign residents, who worship freely.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom; however, the constitution states that citizens will draw governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets and that Islam is the state religion.

COMOROS

Proselytizing for any religion except Islam is illegal and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The law provides for prosecution of converts from Islam, but penalties are ill-defined.

The president nominates the grand mufti, who is part of the government and manages issues concerning religion and religious administration. The grand mufti's position is attached to the Ministry of Justice, Public Service, Administrative Reforms, Human Rights, and Islamic Affairs, and he counsels the government on matters of the practice of Islam and Islamic law. The grand mufti periodically consults with a group of elders to assess whether principles of Islam are being respected and he regularly addresses the country on the radio regarding social and religious issues, such as delinquency, alcohol abuse, 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 are sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public schools at the middle school level. The public school system is in disarray and curricula vary widely; private schools with French curricula and madrassahs fill the gap. There is no provision 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 private schools at least part-time to learn to read and recite the Quran. Although attendance is subject to social pressure, there is no government sanction for opting out.

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

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government did not consistently enforce the laws prohibiting proselytizing or conversions from Islam. There were no prosecutions in 2012.

COMOROS

The government allowed organized religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy, and assemble for peaceful religious activities.

The government funded the country's only public university to ensure the availability of local educational opportunities. This was in part due to concerns that youth who studied abroad in countries with differing or no Islamic traditions could return home and attempt to influence the traditional moderate Sunni tradition on the islands.

The government did not generally enforce bans on alcohol and "immodest" dress.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, particularly of non-Muslim citizens. Isolated Christians who were not connected to the Catholic parish or the Protestant mission group and those who converted from Islam faced societal pressure to refrain from religious practice. Non-Muslim foreigners encountered little to no discrimination. All citizens faced some familial and societal pressure to practice the most significant elements of Islam, particularly observing the fast and doing good works during Ramadan. There were reports of increasing village-level tension surrounding isolated adherents of Shia Islam, who are seen as out of step with the country's Sunni norm and connected to political tension between the former president and the current administration.

Most societal pressure and discrimination occurred at the village level. Converts to non-Muslim religions sometimes excluded themselves from schools or villages after facing discrimination. The extent of discrimination typically depended on the degree of influence local imams and other teachers of Islam exercised. Societal pressure and intimidation kept citizens away from the three churches, which were used almost exclusively by foreigners. The very few Christian Comorans generally practiced their religion openly only in association with established Christian groups like the Catholic Church.

The overriding value of education reportedly deterred individuals who belong to minority religious groups from protesting against their tenets not being taught in the schools.

COMOROS

The Protestant-church affiliated “Groupe de Service Voluntaire” continued to operate humanitarian and development programs, as it has for nearly 20 years, with strong community ties and no government interference.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar, periodically visited the country and engaged with government officials and religious leaders on issues of tolerance and religious freedom.