



Mauritania

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

The 1991 Constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. The Government prohibits the printing and distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. Police detained at least two persons for proselytizing.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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 419,212 square miles and a population of 3.3 million. Almost the entire population practices Sunni Islam. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims, almost exclusively non-Mauritanian; Roman Catholic or other Christian churches are located in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Although there are no synagogues, a very small number of expatriates practice Judaism.

There were several foreign faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in humanitarian and developmental work in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The 1991 Constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the sole religion of its citizens and the state. The Government prohibits the printing and distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, although possession of these materials is legal. The Government also prohibits proselytization of Muslims by non-Muslims. A constitutional mandate restricts non-Muslims to meeting in the few Catholic or other Christian churches.

Shari'a provides legal principles upon which the law and legal procedures are based. Although there is no specific legal prohibition against proselytizing by non-Muslims, in practice the Government prohibits such activity through the broad interpretation of Article 5 of the Constitution that states, "Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the State."

The country's first truly democratic government was inaugurated in April 2007 under President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. The Government's efforts to build national unity between ethnically African and Arab populations was accompanied by efforts to assert that outreach to African groups did not come at the cost of abandoning the Arab identity embraced by many citizens.

The Government and citizenry considered Islam to be the essential cohesive element unifying the country's various ethnic groups. There is a cabinet-level Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education. The High Council of Islam, consisting of six imams, advised the transitional and current governments on the conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts. Although the Government provided a small stipend to the imam

of the Central Mosque in the capital, mosques and Islamic schools are normally supported by their members and other donors.

The Government did not register religious groups; however, secular NGOs, including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of the Interior. NGOs must agree to refrain from proselytizing or otherwise promoting any religion other than Islam. In addition, the Government requires that religious groups must receive official recognition before they can meet, even in private homes.

The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that uses principles of Shari'a in matters concerning the family and modern legal principles in all other matters. The testimony of two women is necessary to equal that of one man. In awarding an indemnity to the family of a woman who has been killed, the courts grant only half the amount that they would award for a man's death. For commercial and other issues not addressed specifically by Shari'a, the law and courts treat women and men equally.

The Government requires members of the Constitutional Council and the High Council of Magistrates to take an oath of office that includes a promise to God to uphold the law of the land in conformity with Islamic precepts.

The Government observed Islamic holy days as national holidays.

Both private Islamic schools and public schools include classes on religion. These classes teach the history and principles of Islam and the classical Arabic of the Qur'an. Although attendance at these religious classes is ostensibly required, many students, the great majority of whom are Muslim, decline to attend for various ethnolinguistic, religious, and personal reasons. Students are able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas, despite missing these classes, provided they perform sufficiently well in their other classes.

During the reporting period, the Government adopted an Islamic Sunday to Thursday work week and increased its use of Arabic over French in official speeches and correspondence.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to restrict Protestant groups from meeting in members' homes until they received official recognition.

As in the previous reporting period, the Government restricted the use of mosque loudspeakers exclusively for the call to prayer and Friday service, in accordance with a 2003 law that prohibits the use of mosques for any form of political activity.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In March 2008 security forces detained a man at a vehicle check point between Nouakchott and Rosso for carrying large amounts of undeclared currency and Christian proselytizing material. The officials held the man briefly before releasing him with a warning about proselytizing.

On or about August 21, 2007, Nouakchott police arrested a Christian convert on charges of proselytizing. After several days' detention, police released the man with a verbal warning.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discussed religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy actively engaged prominent religious leaders in a dialogue to broaden mutual understanding of religious freedom principles and to explain the freedom with which Muslims practice their religion in the United States.

Released on September 19, 2008

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Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.