

MAURITANIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Islam as the sole religion of the citizens and state. Only Muslims may be citizens, and apostasy is a crime punishable by death. On November 15, the Supreme Court heard arguments in the case of blogger Mohamad Cheikh Ould Mohamad Ould Mkheytir, often known as MKheytir. MKheytir was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death in December 2014. At the November hearing for MKheytir's case, hundreds of individuals protested outside of the courthouse demanding his execution. The case was awaiting judgment from the Supreme Court at the end of the year. On December 20, 2015, several local news outlets reported that the government closed 40 madrassahs located in the Hodh El Garbi. Local authorities stated they closed the madrassahs because of their affiliation with Warsh, an unauthorized Islamic institute. The government reopened the schools on January 6, following demonstrations in many communities. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (MIATE) continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups to combat extremism, radicalization, and terrorism through a series of workshops in all 15 provinces.

On September 12, during the annual Eid al-Adha observance, Imam Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, the imam of the Grand Mosque of Nouakchott, warned of what he called the spread and growing threat of Shia Islam in the country. The imam also stated government authorities should sever ties with Iran in order to stop the spread of Iranian Shia Islam. On March 30, the Mauritanian Bar Association, in collaboration with the Muslim World Lawyers Organization, held a one-day seminar in Nouakchott on the role of Islamic law in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism.

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador and senior visiting U.S. government officials, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the president and prime minister. Embassy officials raised the MKheytir apostasy case with authorities on multiple occasions. The Ambassador urged authorities to ensure that judicial proceedings were transparent. The Ambassador hosted two iftars at which he discussed religious tolerance with government officials and religious and civil society leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.7 million (July 2016 estimate). Nearly all are Sunni Muslims. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims, mostly Christians and a small number of Jews, almost all of whom are foreigners.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the sole religion of its citizens and the state. Only Muslims may be citizens. Persons who convert from Islam lose their citizenship.

The law and legal procedures are derived from a combination of French civil law and sharia. The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that uses principles of sharia in matters concerning the family and secular legal principles in all other matters.

The law prohibits apostasy. A Muslim convicted of apostasy who does not recant within three days may be sentenced to death and have his or her property confiscated. The government, however, has never applied capital punishment in this regard.

The government does not register Islamic religious groups, but all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of Interior. NGOs must also agree to refrain from proselytizing or otherwise promoting any religion other than Islam. The law requires the Ministry of Interior to authorize all group meetings, including non-Islamic religious gatherings, in advance, even those held in private homes.

By law, the MIATE is responsible for enacting and disseminating fatwas, fighting “extremism,” promoting research in Islamic studies, organizing the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, and monitoring mosques. The government appoints the six imams of the High Council of Islam, who advise the government on conformity of legislation to Islamic precepts. The government also appoints the High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals, which has sole authority to regulate fatwa

issuance and resolve related disputes among citizens and between citizens and public agencies.

The law 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.

A ministerial decree requires public schools and private secondary schools – but not international schools – to teach four hours of Islamic studies per week. Religious instruction in Arabic is required for students seeking the baccalaureate.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On November 15, the Supreme Court heard arguments in the case of blogger Mohamad Cheikh Ould Mohamad Ould Mkheytir, often known as MKheytir. MKheytir was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death in December 2014. At the November hearing for MKheytir's case, hundreds of individuals protested outside of the courthouse demanding his execution. One of MKheytir's defense lawyers reported to the media that he received death threats for representing the accused. Several of the prosecuting lawyers threatened the justices in court if they failed to affirm the death sentence. The November hearing followed a ruling in April by the Regional Court of Appeals in Nouadhibou, which affirmed the death sentence for MKheytir, but determined that his recantation in the appellate court was proper and timely. In 2013, MKheytir published an online article, *Religion and Religiousity and the Blacksmiths*, that the government said criticized the Prophet Muhammad and implicitly blamed the nation's religious establishment for the plight of the country's *forgeron* (blacksmith) caste. This caste has traditionally suffered discrimination. The case was awaiting judgment from the Supreme Court at the end of the year.

On December 20, 2015, several local news outlets reported that the government closed 40 madrassahs in the Hodh El Garbi district in the southeast, 680 miles from Nouakchott. Local authorities stated they closed the madrassahs on the basis of their affiliation with Warsh, an unauthorized Islamic institute. The government reopened the schools on January 6, following demonstrations in many communities.

The MIATE continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious groups to combat extremism, radicalization, and terrorism through a series of workshops in all 15 provinces.

Authorized churches were able to conduct services within their premises, but could not proselytize publicly. No public expression of religion except Islam was allowed.

An unofficial government requirement restricted non-Muslims worship to the few recognized Christian churches. There were Roman Catholic and other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Kaedi, Atar, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Mauritanian citizens could not attend non-Islamic religious services, which remained restricted to foreigners. By the end of the year, the Ministry of Interior had not acted on a request by a group of foreign Protestants for authorization to build their own place of worship. The group first sought authorization to construct a place of worship in 2006, and then renewed the process in 2012, but was still awaiting approval as of the end of the year.

Although there remained no specific legal prohibition against non-Muslims proselytizing, in practice the government prohibited such activity through the broad interpretation of the constitution stating Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the state.

The possession of non-Islamic religious materials remained legal, although the government continued to prohibit their printing and distribution. The government maintained a Quranic television channel and a Quranic radio station. Both stations sponsored regular programming on themes of moderation in Islam.

The government continued to provide funding to mosques and Islamic schools under its control. The government paid monthly salaries of 50,000 ouguiyas (\$152) to 200 imams who passed an examination conducted by a government-funded panel of imams and heads of mosques and Islamic schools. It also paid monthly salaries of 25,000-100,000 ouguiyas (\$76-\$303) to 30 members of the National Union of Mauritanian Imams, an authority established to regulate the relationship between the religious community and the MIATE.

Islamic classes remained part of the educational curriculum, but attendance at the classes was not mandatory. The results in the classes did not count significantly in the national exams that determine further placement. Additionally, many students reportedly did not attend these religious classes for various ethnolinguistic,

religious, and personal reasons. Students were able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas despite missing these classes, provided they performed otherwise satisfactorily in other mandatory subjects. The Ministry of National Education and the MIATE continued to reaffirm the importance of the Islamic education program at the secondary level; the government reportedly considered religious education a tool to protect children and society against extremism and to promote Islamic culture.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the annual Eid al-Adha observance, Imam Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Nouakchott, warned of what he called the spread and growing threat of Shia Islam in the country. The imam also stated government authorities should sever ties with Iran in order to stop the spread of Iranian Shia Islam.

On March 30, the Mauritanian Bar Association, in collaboration with Muslim World Lawyers Organization, organized a one-day seminar in Nouakchott on the role of Islamic law in the fight against terrorism and religious extremism. The seminar provided presentations and lectures related to the role of Islamic law in maintaining peaceful coexistence and global security.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador and senior visiting U.S. government officials, discussed religious tolerance with senior government officials, including the president and prime minister. Embassy officials raised the MKheytir apostasy case with authorities on multiple occasions. The Ambassador urged authorities to ensure that judicial proceedings were transparent.

The Ambassador met regularly with religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar in Kiffa, the capital city of the Assaba District on June 22, which was attended by the Governor of Assaba, the Mayor of Kiffa, journalists, traditional leaders, and civil society representatives. The Ambassador held a second iftar at his residence in Nouakchott the following evening, attended by the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of Islamic affairs, other senior government officials, journalists, and civil society leaders. A U.S.-based imam, visiting the country on a U.S. government-sponsored speaker program, spoke at both iftars about the necessity of involving religious leaders in encouraging freedom and equality among religious groups. The imam spoke about the

necessity for the religious leaders to be involved and engaged in order to use the practice of tolerance in Islam to spread freedom, equality, and democratic practices. The Ambassador's remarks at the iftars focused on the value of religious tolerance and the importance of interfaith dialogue based on mutual respect.