

# **UNION OF THE COMOROS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution specifies Islam is the state religion but proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all regardless of religious belief. A law establishes Sunni Islam under the Shafi'i doctrine as the "official religious reference." Proselytizing for any religion except Sunni Islam is illegal, and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places is prohibited on the basis of "affronting society's cohesion and endangering national unity." Gendarmerie officers arrested Shia clerics and temporarily detained them in Moroni and Mutsamudu after videos of an Ashura observance appeared on Facebook. In October gendarmes in Mutsamudu prevented Ahmadi Muslims from celebrating the inauguration of the first Ahmadi mosque in the country after the Minister of the Interior banned all non-Sunni religious practice among Muslims. According to Shia Muslim religious leaders, some Shia were arrested in their homes because, after their mosques were repeatedly demolished, the imam allocated a part of his home as a "mosque" which authorities deemed a "public space."

As in previous years, there were reports communities unofficially shunned from their activities individuals who were suspected of converting from Islam to Christianity. Societal abuse and discrimination against non-Muslim citizens persisted, 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.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom including the minister of justice, the minister of interior, the commander of the tendarmerie, and the governors of Anjouan and Moheli. Embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom with religious and civil society leaders and others, including members of minority religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 795,000 (July 2016 estimate). The U.S. government estimates the population is 98 percent Sunni Muslim. Roman Catholics, Shia, Sufi, and Ahmadi Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants together make up less than 2 percent of the population.

Non-Muslims are mainly foreign residents and are concentrated in the country's capital, Moroni, and the capital of Anjouan, Mutsamudu. Shia and Ahmadi Muslims mostly live in Anjouan.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states Islam is the state religion and citizens shall draw the state's governing principles and rules from Islamic tenets. It proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all individuals regardless of religion or belief. A law establishes the Sunni Shafi'i doctrine as the "official religious reference" and provides sanctions of five months to one year imprisonment and/or a fine of 100,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs (\$216 to \$1,081) for campaigns, propaganda, or religious practices or customs in public places which could cause social unrest or undermine national cohesion.

Proselytizing for any religion except Sunni Islam is illegal, and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The penal code states "whoever discloses, spreads, and teaches Muslims a religion other than Islam will be punished with imprisonment of three months to one year and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs" (\$108 to \$1,081).

There is no official registration for religious groups. The law allows Sunni religious groups to establish places of worship, train clergy, and assemble for peaceful religious activities. It does not allow non-Sunni religious groups to assemble for peaceful religious activities in public places.

The proselytizing or performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places is prohibited on the basis of "affronting society's cohesion and endangering national unity". Without specifying religion, the penal code provides penalties for the profaning of any spaces designated for worship, interfering with the delivery of religious leaders in the performance of their duties, or in cases where the practice of sorcery, magic, or charlatanism interferes with public order.

By law the president nominates the grand mufti, the senior Muslim cleric who is part of the government and manages issues concerning religion and religious administration. The grand mufti heads an independent government institution called the Supreme National Institution in Charge of Religious Practices in the Union of the Comoros. The grand mufti counsels the government on matters concerning the practice of Islam and Islamic law. The grand mufti chairs and

periodically consults with the Council of Ulema, a group of religious elders cited in the constitution, to assess whether citizens are respecting the principles of Islam.

The law provides that before the month of Ramadan, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Council of Ulema publish a ministerial decree providing instructions to the population for that month.

The government uses the Quran in public primary schools for Arabic reading instruction. There are more than 200 public schools with Quranic instruction. The tenets of Islam are sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public and private schools at the middle school and high school levels.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

The government did not consistently enforce the law prohibiting proselytizing and did not prosecute any such cases during the year.

In October just before Ashura, the minister of the interior issued a ban on non-Sunni religious practices. Several Shia Muslims nonetheless observed Ashura in private residences. After a video of their activities appeared on Facebook, gendarmerie officers arrested Shia clerics and temporarily detained them in Moroni and Mutsamudu. A number of blogs and media articles criticized the intervention as illegal. A Sunni cleric in Anjouan stated the detention of the Shia clerics during Ashura was justified because they were considered to be practicing “in public.” Given the alleged razing of nine or 10 Shia mosques over the years, the imam allocated a part of his home as a “mosque” and invited his congregation to worship there. The Sunni cleric explained that local religious authorities understood “in private” to mean “with your immediate family only.” This case was never tried in court, however.

Gendarmes in Mutsamudu prevented Ahmadi Muslims from celebrating the inauguration of the first Ahmadi mosque in the country, which opened on October 21.

During the year the minister of interior banned alcohol consumption and daytime swimming during Ramadan, which the police enforced.

The grand mufti regularly addressed the country on the radio, applying Islamic principles to social issues such as delinquency, alcohol abuse, marriage, divorce, and education.

Almost all children between the ages of three and six attended private, informal schools at least part-time to learn to read and recite the Quran. During the year, the government announced its plans to expand religious and Arabic teaching to all public schools to further reduce the demand for unlicensed and unregulated private classes and reduce the potential for abuse in private facilities.

The government funded an Islamic studies program, known as the Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Science (Imam al-Shafi'i Faculty) within the country's only public university. The government stated it initiated this step in 2003 to ensure the availability of local educational opportunities and to respond to concerns that youth who studied abroad in countries with differing or no Islamic traditions could return home and attempt to influence what the government considered to be the moderate Sunni tradition on the islands. The government restricted study by its citizens in Iran and Pakistan.

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

As in previous years, there were reports communities unofficially shunned from their activities individuals who were suspected of converting from Islam to Christianity. Societal abuse and discrimination against non-Muslim citizens persisted, particularly against Christians or those who were converts from Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners reported 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. The extent of de facto discrimination typically depended on the level of involvement of local Islamic teachers. Most non-Muslim citizens reportedly did not openly practice their faith for fear of societal rejection. Persons who raised their children with non-Muslim religious teachings faced societal discrimination. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to restrict the use of the country's three churches to non-citizens.

### **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 visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom, including the minister of justice, the minister of interior, the commander of the gendarmerie, and

the governors of Anjouan and Moheli. Embassy representatives met with the minister of education to discuss madrassas. Embassy officers also met with Muslim religious and civil society leaders and others on issues of religious freedom, including the NGO Service d'Ecoute.