

# UNION OF THE COMOROS 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The new constitution adopted in August specifies Islam is the state religion and defines the national identity as being based on a single religion – Sunni Islam – but proclaims equality of rights and obligations for all regardless of religious belief. The constitution also specifies that the principles and rules that will regulate worship and social life be based on Sunni Islam under the Shafi’i doctrine. Proselytizing for any religion except Sunni Islam is illegal, and the law provides for deportation of foreigners who do so. The law prohibits the performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places on the basis of “affronting society’s cohesion and endangering national unity.” National leaders explicitly condoned harassment against individuals practicing non-Sunni forms of Islam. On at least two occasions, President Azali Assoumani said Shia Muslims should leave the country and called for their expulsion. On February 12, at the conclusion of the “assises nationales” (national convention), President Azali said “those who practice Shia Islam are not welcome; they should leave the country immediately.” On July 16, he called on citizens to “expel the Shia who have established themselves in our country” and blamed Shia for “[endangering] peace and security of every citizen on earth.” The interior minister announced that from March onward, no imam or preacher would be permitted to preach or lead prayer, regardless of location, without prior government approval, and that approved imams would receive a license in the form of an identity card. The system of identity cards was not implemented by year’s end, and the government imposed the prior approval requirement for preaching on only one individual, a former president under house arrest.

There continued to be reports that communities unofficially shunned individuals who were suspected of converting from Islam to Christianity.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy in Antananarivo, Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom. The U.S. Charge d’Affaires met with President Azali and expressed his concerns about statements made by the president and the destruction of mosques in 2017. Other embassy officials conveyed their concern and alarm over the increasing harassment of religious minorities with the minister of justice, the minister of interior, and the secretary general of the foreign ministry. Embassy representatives

also discussed religious freedom with religious and civil society leaders and others, including members of minority religious groups.

On November 28, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Comoros on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 821,000 (July 2018 estimate), of which 98 percent is 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 new constitution adopted on August 6 states Islam is the state religion and citizens shall draw principles and rules to regulate worship and social life from Shafi'i Sunni Islam. The preamble affirms the will of the Comorian people to cultivate a national identity based on a single religion, Sunni Islam. 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 (\$230 to \$1,200) for campaigns, propaganda, or religious practices or customs in public places that 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" (\$120 to \$1,200).

There is no official registration process 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 law prohibits proselytizing or performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places, based on “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 appoints 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 government-supported, fee-based schools with Quranic instruction. The tenets of Islam are sometimes taught in conjunction with Arabic in public and private schools at the middle and high school levels. Religious education is not mandatory.

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

### **Government Practices**

On February 12, at the conclusion of the “assises nationales,” a national convention of key leaders, civil society, and international community members for speeches and workshops on the state of the country and the direction of future development, President Azali said “Those who practice Shia Islam are not welcome; they should leave the country immediately.” On July 16, he called on

citizens to “expel the Shia who have established themselves in our country” and blamed Shia for “[endangering] peace and security of every citizen on earth.”

On January 30, the interior minister announced that from March onward, no imam or preacher would be permitted to preach or lead prayer, regardless of location, without prior government approval, and that approved imams would receive a license in the form of an identity card. He noted that this would include family ceremonies. The policy appears to have been enforced only once, in May, when the prefect of Grande Comore issued a directive requiring former President Abdallah Mohamed Sambi, leader of the main opposition party with the title of “*ustadh*” (an honorific title of respect), to obtain permission from the local Ulema Council prior to leading prayer in Moroni, where he remained under house arrest. The system of identity cards was not implemented by year’s end.

In September the government warned its *cadis*, who implement Islamic family law throughout the country, that they would be subject to stricter education and certification requirements. One reason given was that *cadis* were approving underage marriages despite the law mandating a minimum age of 18 for marriage. The government stated that *cadis* not meeting the minimum qualifications would be replaced.

Government officials stated that foreigners were free to practice any religion they wished, but citizens were obliged to practice only Shafi’i Sunni Islam in public, or leave the country.

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

As in previous years, there were reports that communities unofficially shunned individuals 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.

Most non-Muslim citizens reportedly did not openly practice their faith for fear of societal rejection. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to restrict the use of the country's three churches to noncitizens.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Madagascar visited the country and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom. The U.S. Charge d’Affaires and a U.S. embassy official both raised concerns about restrictions on religious freedom with President Azali. Other embassy officials met with the minister of justice, the minister of interior, and the foreign ministry’s secretary-general to discuss the situation of religious minorities and to express their concern and alarm regarding the increasing harassment of religious minorities.

Embassy officers met with a wide variety of Muslim and Christian religious and civil society leaders on issues of religious freedom.

On November 28, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Comoros on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.