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## Mauritania

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

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 proselytizing by non-Muslims.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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, religious leaders, and civil society 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 2.9 million.

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

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

#### Section II. Status of Government Respect for 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 prohibited the printing and distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, although possession of these materials is legal.

There was an unofficial government requirement that restricts non-Muslims to holding worship services only in the few Christian churches. However, religious groups can meet in private homes after they received official authorization from the authorities.

Shari'a provides legal principles upon which the law and legal procedures were based.

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

The government and citizens 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 government on conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts. The government, mosque members, and other donors normally supported mosques and Islamic schools. Most of the contributions were made during the month of Ramadan.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: First Muharram (Islamic New Year), Eid al-Mowlud (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha (Tabaski).

The government did not register religious groups; however, 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 required that groups, including religious groups, receive official authorization before they can meet, even in private homes. This requirement was not always enforced in practice.

The judiciary consisted 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 was necessary to equal that of one man under Shari'a. In awarding an indemnity to the family of a woman who had been killed, the courts granted only half the amount they would award for a man's death. For commercial and other issues not addressed specifically by Shari'a, the law and courts treated women and men equally.

The government required 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 restricted the use of mosque loudspeakers exclusively to the call to prayer and to Friday service in accordance with a 2003 law that prohibits the use of mosques for any form of political activity.

Both public schools and private Islamic schools included classes on Islam. Although attendance at these religious classes was ostensibly required, many students declined to attend for various ethno-linguistic, religious, and personal reasons. Students were able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas, despite missing these classes, provided they performed sufficiently well in their other classes.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

On September 14, 2009, Police Commissioner Abdel Vettah Ould Hababa closed three churches frequented by West Africans in the Sebkhia district of Nouakchott. According to press reports, the police confiscated Bibles and furniture and briefly arrested 81 persons, including the pastor. There was no additional information at the end of the reporting period.

According to press reports, on August 31, 2009, police in Nouakchott arrested approximately 10 individuals who possessed a large quantity of Christian books, including Bibles. The individuals were released after two days in custody and the materials returned.

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#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In an effort to curtail radical extremism, the government sponsored various round tables on moderation in Islam, recently conducted a census of all mosques in the country, and launched a new initiative to pay monthly salaries of \$72 (50,000 um) to 500 moderate imams who fulfilled stringent selection criteria and passed a test. Other recent measures against extremism included the opening of a state-sponsored Qur'anic radio, regular television programming on themes of moderation in Islam, and an ongoing dialogue between imams and Salafists who have renounced violence. On September 9 on the eve of the Eid al-Fitr holiday, the head of state pardoned and released 35 Salafists who had renounced violence. Although 15 had been convicted in the courts, none of those released had committed violent crimes. Separately, on September 14, 166 common criminals were pardoned and released, also as a traditional Islamic gesture of clemency.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, U.S. citizens active in Christian circles reported that persons who participated in Christian gatherings were ostracized by their families and neighbors.

#### 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 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. Special Representative to Muslim Communities Farah Anwar Pandith visited the country from April 13 to 17, 2010, and engaged imams and students on religious freedom in the United States. In keeping with U.S. government initiatives, the embassy organized Muslim outreach events, including events highlighting religious freedom in the United States, such as Ramadan programs featuring iftars (evening meal during Ramadan) with a Palestinian-American guest speaker who talked about the Muslim experience in the U.S. and interfaith dialogue, and a Muslim-American couple. The embassy also organized a roundtable with an imam from the country who participated in the International Visitors program and who shared his impressions of religious freedom in the United States with students.

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