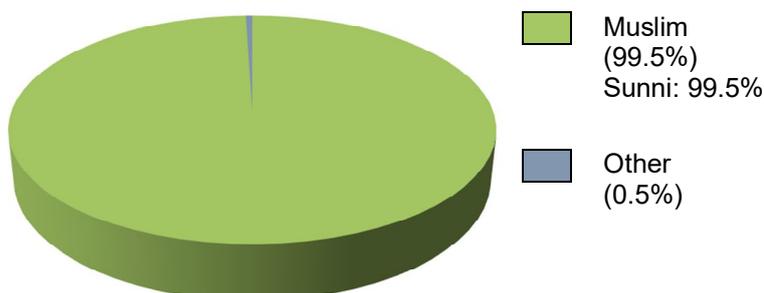


MAURITANIA



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| Area ¹ : 1,030,700 km ² | Population ² : 3,596,702 | Political system : Autocracy ³ | Major Language(s) : Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof, French ⁴ |
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Legal Framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The vast but only very thinly populated state of Mauritania in West Africa has proclaimed itself an Islamic Republic ever since independence in 1960. It is one of only two Islamic republics in Africa, along with Gambia, which declared itself an “Islamic Republic” in 2015. And since Mauritania is virtually 100 percent Muslim, this fact has a profound impact on the reality of life in this country which straddles the transition zone between the Sahara in the north and the Sahel in the south of the country.

Islam is the state religion and only Muslims may hold citizenship. Anyone who converts from Islam to another religion thereby loses Mauritanian citizenship.⁵ Significantly, the constitution of 2006 contains no provisions regarding religious freedom. It stipulates in Article 23 that the President must be a Muslim.⁶

For the small number of people of other religions, there is virtually no possibility to practise their faith, at least publicly. Islamic *Shari'a* law applies throughout Mauritania in social matters, notably in family law. Harsh punishments apply in some areas, including flogging and, in the case of apostasy, even capital punishment – although the death penalty has never as yet been carried out (at least until the end of 2014).⁷ Officially, Mauritania's traditionally nomadic population is 100 percent Muslim (almost exclusively Sunnis).⁸ They are mostly organised in Sufi brotherhoods such as the Qadiriya, Tijaniya and Hamawiya. The city of Chinguetti is one of the holy places of Islam. The highest governing body for all religious matters is the Haut Conseil Islamique.

Incidents

In Mauritania more moderate forms of Islam prevail. However, fundamentalism and extremism have increased.⁹ The government is attempting to combat this tendency through various Islamic organisations and through a nationwide programme of education for imams.¹⁰

On 24th December 2014, for the first time ever in Mauritania, a Muslim was formally sentenced to death on a charge of apostasy. That said, whether religion was the real reason for the judgement, however, is questionable. According to the German-based international human rights organisation *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker* (GfbV) (Society for Threatened Peoples International STPI), a 29-year-old blogger, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed, had been charged with criticising the Muslim Prophet, and at the same time criticising the country's existing discriminatory social order.¹¹ Ould Mohamed had already been arrested nearly a year earlier, on 2nd January 2014 and subsequently imprisoned. Despite his protestations that his article had been misunderstood and that his intention had not been to criticise the Muslim Prophet but only to point out social injustices in his country, he was found guilty of apostasy and sentenced to death. He apparently fainted when the sentence was pronounced. According to Amnesty International, the death penalty has not been imposed in Mauritania since 1987.¹² However, according to the STPI, people in the courtroom and outside in the streets were exultant at the death penalty: "The judges can be sure that the harsh judgment is supported by many Mauritians. The caste of the blacksmiths, for which the defendant had tried to advocate, has quite a bad reputation – similar to the descendants of African slaves. Blacksmiths are regarded as ill-fated, and it is hardly possible for them to achieve any social advancement even if they manage to change their occupation. Members of this population group cannot be elected as members of parliament or as mayors," the agency reported, adding that in recent years, "there has been an initiative to work against the marginalization of the blacksmith caste by organising press conferences, events and human rights campaigns to draw attention to the cause and to demand an end to the discrimination."¹³

According to the organisation Open Doors, Mauritania remains one of the most closed countries in the world. It states that Salafist Muslims – an ultraconservative tendency within Islam – are increasingly gaining in influence through their efforts to impose strict moral rules.¹⁴ In addition to this, the influence of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) is also constantly increasing, while support among native Mauritians is also growing for the group, which seeks to monitor Christian activities in the country. In particular, some regions in the north and east of the country are increasingly coming under the influence of extremist Islamic groups, most of which are in some way associated with Al Qaeda.

There is a group of a few thousand Christians in the country, the majority of them Catholics. However, they are scarcely visible, not only because of the severe legal restrictions, but also because of the inevitable fierce opposition of fundamentalist Muslims, and because the official state bodies such as the High Islamic Council of Mauritania take very seriously their role as guardians of Islamic omnipresence.

This attitude is also rooted in the constitution. Article 5 states: "Islam is the religion of the people and of the nation."¹⁵ And even if these words do not directly say as much, their effect exerts a profoundly restrictive influence, since they are generally interpreted as meaning that non-Muslims are not free to exercise their religion.

There are two kinds of Christians in Mauritania – foreign Christians and native Christians from a Muslim background.¹⁶ Since both the indigenous Islamic culture and the Mauritanian law are decidedly hostile towards evangelisation, the majority of Christians in the country are either migrant workers or foreign visitors. The foreign migrant workers are for the most part from the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, and endure fierce discrimination. The Catholic Church is represented by just one diocese, in the capital Nouakchott, and also has Churches in the cities of Atar, Zouérate, Nouadhibou and Rosso. The Bishop of Nouakchott is the German-born missionary Albert Happe, a

member of the congregation of the White Fathers, or African missionaries (MAfr). Every form of Christian evangelisation is strictly forbidden, however, and a punishable offence.

As for Christians of Muslim origin, they face extreme social pressure from family members, tribal representatives and local mosque leaders. Foreign Christians have a little more freedom, yet it is still extremely complicated for them to live as Christians in Mauritania. There is no possibility for Mauritanian Christians to register their communities officially. For this reason, they are generally forced to meet secretly.

In such circumstances, the opportunities for the Christian minority to develop and express itself are very limited, but not without fruit. The Catholic Church in Mauritania devotes itself above all to social and charitable work. Bishop Happe, who is known for his open and unprejudiced attitude to Islam, has devoted himself to caring for African migrants and giving them shelter in the parishes in Mauritania, and also to burying drowned “boat people” – would-be migrants, whose bodies are often washed up on the shores of Mauritania. The bishop reports that there are some Muslims “with blinkers” who would not offer a friendly greeting to a Catholic bishop, and other Mauritanians “who quite deliberately avert their gaze, or make less than friendly remarks”. However, after 17 years living in the country, his experience has been that the majority of the people respect the Christian faith.¹⁷

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

This respect for Christianity has not however led to increased freedoms or more rights for non-Muslims. The dissemination of the Bible and all other non-Islamic religious writings remains forbidden. Islamic religious instruction is obligatory in all the schools and *Shari’a* law is standard in all family and personal matters.

A principal social problem in Mauritania is the care of refugees, notably from the civil war in Mali – victims of Islamist violence in the struggle for power in Mauritania's eastern neighbour. In 2015, in the refugee camp of Mbera, in a remote region some 30 miles (50 km) north of the Mali-Mauritanian frontier, there were almost 50,000 people receiving emergency aid from the UNHCR.¹⁸ And, given continuing insecurity in northern Mali, there is little hope that they will soon be able to return to their homes. Another widespread social evil is the continuing high level of slavery in Mauritania. They may be called “servants” or “house helps”, but in fact these people are slaves. Although in theory the law has prohibited slavery since 1981, the keeping of slaves is an unquestioned part of daily life in the country. A law from 2007 makes keeping slaves punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment and the constitution describes slavery as “a crime against humanity”. In addition, the government declares its intention to fight slavery still more strongly in future. However, in reality all these declarations of intent have had very little effect.¹⁹

During the period of this report, there have been no notable changes at the institutional level in regard to religious freedom. But the threat from Islamic fundamentalism and Islamist tendencies remain severe. Bishop Happe is gravely concerned at the rise of Wahhabi tendencies – an Islamist movement from Saudi Arabia. He stated: “Mauritania is already an Islamic Republic, but the Wahhabis want more. They want their own teachings to become the state religion. They are Islamic fundamentalists, close to Al Qaeda, and even the Taliban represent a similar ideology to that of the Wahhabis in Mauritania.”²⁰

¹ CIA 2016: The World Factbook, estimate, July 2015.

² CIA 2016: The World Factbook, estimate, July 2015

³ Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz took power in a coup in 2008, and was elected president afterward, he gained another five-year term in 2014 in an election boycotted by most of the opposition. Mauritania has had a dozen coups or attempted coups since independence from France in 1960; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13881985>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

⁶ http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/mr00000_.html#A023_

⁷ http://bautz.de/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=250&catid=84

⁸ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

⁹ Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), cited in the Munzinger Archiv 2016

¹⁰ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

¹¹ <https://www.gfbv.de/de/news/umstrittenes-todesurteil-mauretanien-duldet-keine-kritik-an-tabus-und-sozialer-benachteiligung-6660/>

¹² http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/12/25/mauretanien_todesstrafe_wegen_glaubensabfall/1116034

¹³ <https://www.gfbv.de/de/news/umstrittenes-todesurteil-mauretanien-duldet-keine-kritik-an-tabus-und-sozialer-benachteiligung-6660/>

¹⁴ <https://www.opendoors.de/verfolgung/laenderprofile/mauretanien/>

¹⁵ http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/mr00000_.html#A023_

¹⁶ <https://www.opendoors.de/verfolgung/laenderprofile/mauretanien/>

¹⁷ Christmas letter 2012 from Bishop Martin Happe, Nouakchott

¹⁸ UNHCR 2016: 2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Mauritania

¹⁹ http://de.radiovaticana.va/storico/2014/01/19/mauretanien_sklaverei_ist_%E2%80%99Esoziales_problem/ted-765306

²⁰ Ibid.