



ania

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **99.1%**
- Others : **0.9%**

4,166,000

1,030,700 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The sparsely populated West African state of Mauritania has been an Islamic Republic since the country gained independence in 1960. It is the only Islamic state of its kind in Africa, now that the Islamic Republic of Gambia, which is also in the west of the continent, has returned to being a secular republic.^[1] The fact that the population of Mauritania is almost entirely Muslim has a profound impact on everyday life in the country.

Islam is the country's state religion, and citizenship is reserved for Muslims. Renunciation of Islam carries the death penalty.^[2] It is significant that religious freedom is not mentioned in the constitution of 1991. Moreover, article 23 holds that the country's president must be a Muslim.^[3]

The few members of other religions in the country have no way to live out their faith, at least not publicly. Shari'a is applied to questions of civil law in Mauritania, particularly concerning family issues. In some areas, violations of Shari'a are severely punished – through flogging, for example. Capital punishment for renunciation of Islam is a penalty that has not actually been carried to date (as at March 2018).^[4] Officially, the traditionally nomadic population of Mauritania is 100 percent Muslim. These are almost exclusively Sunnis,^[5] mostly organised in Sufi brotherhoods such as the Qadiriya, the Tij?niyyah and the Hamawiya. Chinguetti is one of the holy cities of Islam.

Incidents

During the reporting period, international attention continued concerning Internet blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed, who was sentenced to death in 2014 for blasphemy. In a blog post, he had criticised the social exclusion of the caste of the forgeron ("metal-smiths") and the abuse of religion in discrimination against ethnic and social minorities.

On 9th November 2017, an appeals court in Nouadhibou reduced the sentence to two years' imprisonment and a fine^[6] Mohamed had already spent four years in custody and as, in the court's view, he had served his sentence, he was released. He still lives in fear for his life, however. Devout Muslims in many cities of Mauritania took to the streets in protest at the judicial decision and demanded that the death sentence be carried out!^[7]

The government of Mauritania responded by introducing the mandatory death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy, thus in effect tightening blasphemy legislation.^[8] In late November 2017, a legislative reform was adopted under which blasphemy or apostasy would be punishable by death even if the defendant were to apologise for his or her actions. According to human rights organisations, disputes are now subject to an even greater risk of arbitrariness and abuse. Blasphemy regulations are regularly abused in many Muslim states, for example in neighbourhood disputes and other interpersonal conflicts. Until recently, article 306 of the Mauritanian Penal Code only provided for the death penalty if the accused refused to show remorse. The last time the death penalty was carried out in the country was in 1987!^[9]

The conspicuous presence of radical Islam in Mauritanian society also provide an opening for jihadist groups from abroad who seek to gain a foothold in West Africa.^[10] Mauritania has been considered relatively secure to date, but there are signs that Islamist jihadism is spreading in the country.^[11] In 2017, in the context of the 'G5 Sahel' organisation, the Sahel countries of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad joined forces to combat violence, organised crime, state instability and terrorism, drawing on a unit of 5,000 soldiers. The G5 Sahel alliance is controlled from Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. In mid-December 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel joined the G5 Sahel countries in increasing military resources to combat terrorism. The army was due to be operational by mid-2018. This deadline is questionable, however, as the army lacks equipment and training!^[12]

According to a study published by the NSI American think tank, the spread of jihadism is linked to many factors!^[13] In terms of ideology, the Sahel zone is a rather difficult area for jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the study points out. The people of the region are generally not noted for their religious fervour. However, the susceptibility to extremist movements has also increased in the Sahel. This results from the spread of Wahhabism, the interpretation of Sunni Islam native to Saudi Arabia. There are concerns that the growth in jihadist Islam could cause political and economic crisis. The risk of jihadism in the Sahel region is great as large swaths of this area are essentially free from any state oversight. This is also the poorest Muslim majority area in the world, with weak governments and a lack of national identity.

The danger of falling prey to Islamist jihadists emanates particularly from Mali, Mauritania's neighbour to the east!^[14] There are still many armed groups in Mali; some side with the government, some are aligned with insurgents. Terrorist militias are linked to Ansar al Dine, a local terrorist organization, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or Daesh (ISIS).

Daesh and Al-Qaeda are now no longer fighting just in the north of Mali but in the middle of the country as well!^[15] In central Mali, with the city of Mopti at its centre, nomads are fighting resident farmers for fertile land and the terrorists are exploiting this conflict. They have stepped in to act as mediators in a dispute over grazing grounds. This is how they have gradually seized power in the villages before introducing Shari'a law.

That the nomads are able to make such inroads is because the government is too weak to enforce law and order across the towns and villages.^[16] According to observers, there are three reasons for this.^[17] Soldiers and policemen mostly come from ethnic groups who settle in the south of Mali. They refuse to risk their lives in northern and central Mali, where they cannot speak the local language. Besides, the military and police forces are poorly equipped. They have no chance against the often better-armed and highly motivated jihadists. Thirdly, many people join the terrorists because they are poor and have no future prospects. They feel abandoned by the state.

| Prospects for freedom of religion

Developments regarding religious life in Mauritania and the situation of the small religious minority depend a great deal on two factors. The first concerns domestic developments. There are no signs whatsoever to suggest that the current

government of Mauritania will help promote the basic right of religious freedom. The influence of Islamic conservative forces in the government and in Mauritanian society is great. This is likely to remain the case in future as well. The second factor relates to developments abroad within West Africa. Mali is not the only country in which the influence of Islamist jihadism has increased. Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria are also among the countries that suffer significantly from the influence and violence of extremists. It remains to be seen whether the Western units stationed in the region, now joined to the regional G5 Sahel alliance, have the capability to contain this influence.

Endnotes / Sources

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.