



## GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE – MAY 2021

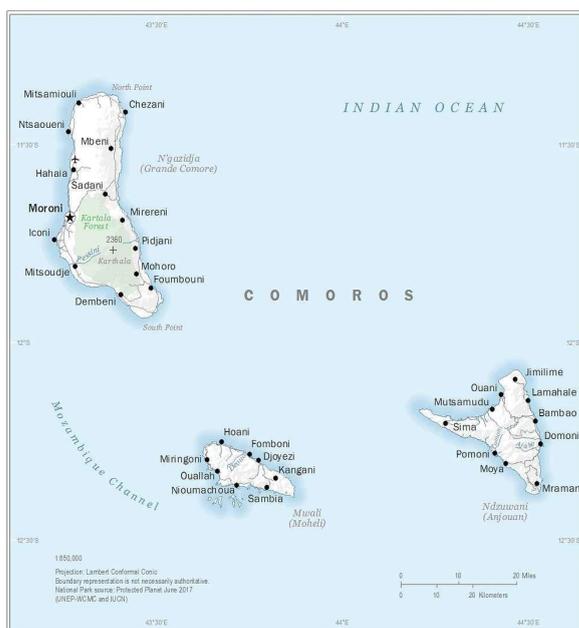
### COUNTRY REPORT – UNION OF THE COMOROS

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#### INTRODUCTION: THE UNION OF THE COMOROS

The Comoros, officially Union of The Comoros, is an insular country in the Indian Ocean, specifically located in the eastern coast of the African continent. The capital and also the largest city is Moroni, and there are three official languages in the territory: the French, Comorian and the Arabic. The religion is a fundamental part of the society and of the government, with the Sunni Islam being the official country's religion (Comoros, 2021).

Comoros is not a populous country, with the estimated population around 850,000 which is 86% of Afro-Arab people. The official currency is the Comorian Franc, the Human Development Index is around 0,554 – considered a medium level and the government is composed of a Federal presidential republic. About the international and foreign relations of the Comoros, the country became the 143<sup>rd</sup> member of the United Nations in 1975, being also an Arab League's and African Union's member state (Comoros, 2021).



(Picryl, 2021).

## **THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN COMOROS**

The Comoros' Constitution defines the Sunni Islam as the official and the state's religion of the country, which is practiced by most part of the population. However, the document also proclaims the equality of rights and/or obligations for all, regardless their religious belief, which is not well recognized and accomplished, especially because of the illegal status of proselytizing any religion except the Sunni Islam (United States Department of State, 2020).

In the State, there is a strong connection between society's cohesion. National unity and the Sunni Islam, which is noticed by the legislation that prohibits and punishes the performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public. Furthermore, this legal application also applies to tourists and immigrants, because if they try to do these types of religious manifestations, the Comorian government has the right to deport them (United States Department of State, 2020).

The U.S. Department of State estimates that 98% of the Comorian population is Sunni Muslim, which means that Roman Catholics, Shia Muslims, Protestants, and other religious groups make up around 2% (United States Department of State, 2020). This reality expresses a difficult situation for these minorities that do not necessarily have the same beliefs as the state's religion, which make them face difficulties to enjoy their right to religious freedom.

It is already known how the religion is important to the Comorian government, and it's also shown on the fines that are charged against these who disobey the Constitutional law on practicing or proselytizing another belief that is not connected to the Islam (United States Department of State, 2020).

One of the most common and one of the mandatory rituals of Sunni Islam and other Muslim's religions is the practice of the Ramadan, which was very affected by the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. This pandemic reality made a lot of countries and governments change their plans about Ramadan in 2020 and 2021 (Pfeifer & Ghaedi, 2020).

Therefore, it is known that the Ramadan is fundamental to the most part of Comorian people, which does not necessarily mean that the entire population will enjoy and feel free to speak and act normally. This situation is quoted by the U.S. Department of State, which says that minority religious groups, especially Christians, prefer to not openly practice their faith for fear of societal rejection, and because of the fasting practice mandatory during Ramadan, they prefer to not eat publicly due to the same reasons (Pfeifer & Ghaedi, 2020; United States Department of State, 2020). This reality demonstrates how difficult it can be to enjoy their own religious freedom in Comoros.



(Dreamstime, 2021).

## **THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS REGIME**

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is clear on its Article 18, saying that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance (United Nations, 1948, p. 1)

According to this reality proposed by the universal declaration, it is known that Comoros does not fulfill its promises within this framework of analysis, especially when it is about minority religious groups such as Catholics and Protestants. Therefore, it is noticed that Comorian people do not enjoy their own right to religious freedom quoted on the country's Constitution,

which means that the respect for this document is limited (United States Department of State, 2020).

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights established a document that is part of the international standards on freedom of religion or belief. According to this reality, the Office of The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) insists on sharing and demonstrating the importance of this document to the International Framework on Religious Freedom (Office of The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010).

The first topic, according to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), says that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”, including “freedom to change his religious belief”. This is an important point, especially when it comes to freedom to adopt, change, or renounce a religion or belief, a right which is not respected nowadays in the Comoros (Office of The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 6).

Thus, the social stigma and discrimination around changing of religion or belief in Comoros, in addition to the constant persecution and criminalization by the government is a situation that goes against the International Human Rights Regime (Office of The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010 and United States Department of State, 2020).

Besides that, as shown by the U.S. Department of State and the situation of minority religious groups in Comoros during Ramadan, it is noticed that the Right to Manifest one’s religion or belief is also not addressed and followed. According to the ICCPR, “everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”, which includes “freedom either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching” (Office of The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 15 and United States Department of

State, 2020).

Furthermore, Comoros is also a signatory of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, which has its Article 8 mentioning that the freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed by the states (African Charter on Human and People's Rights, 1981). Moreover, it is necessary to highlight that all the Charters and Declarations aforementioned quote about the importance of guaranteeing their cited rights to all people, regardless their religion, race, ethnic or other factors – which is unfortunately not fulfilled and followed in the Union of The Comoros.

## **CONCLUSION**

According to that delicate situation in Comoros, it's already shown that the Religious Freedom is limited in the country, which concerns global leaders and international authorities. The International Organizations and treaties should always ensure the importance of the right to religious freedom, especially in countries where the most part of the population follows one single doctrine, which is the Comoros' case.

Thus, the guaranteeing of Religious Freedom for all is not enough. Besides that, it is necessary to invest in education and in acts against the discrimination based on religion or belief, which is a problem in the country, especially when it is about Christian minorities. The ICCPR is clear quoting that each State Party “undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized” in the “Covenant, without distinction of any kind” (Office of The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 48).

Further, it is also important to remember that all persons are equal before the law, which is underlined in the Constitution and in the ICCPR. Thus, following the International Treaties

and frameworks on Human Rights, Comoros should ensure to all of its population the religious freedom and the protection against any type of discrimination based on belief, highlighting that the people who does not follow the state's religion are not less-citizen than the ones who do follow it.

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