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Religious minorities fear backlash as Sunni Islam declared state religion of Comoros



The amended constitution of the Comoros declares Sunni Islam as the “religion of the state”. (Picture by David Stanley)

World Watch Monitor (03.08.2018) - On Monday 30 July, the “Yes” vote recorded an overwhelming victory in the referendum on constitutional reforms in the southeast African island nation of Comoros, declaring Sunni Islam the “religion of the state”.

“The state draws from this religion the principles and rules of Sunnite observance,” the amended constitution reads.

According to World Watch Monitor’s local source, this is expected to have a tough impact on the country’s small Christian minority, who number only a few thousand of the country’s roughly 825,000 population.

“Things have been very hard on indigenous Christians before, and this kind of specification is expected to make things even harder for them,” the source said.

The referendum was initiated by President Azali Assoumani. The amended constitution gives him the right to run for another presidential term; previously the power rotated between the country’s three islands every five years. In April, Assoumani had suspended the constitutional court over “incompetence”, which observers saw as an attempt to diminish the rule of law in the country.



Comoros is an idyllic place for tourists, but difficult for local Christians. (World Watch Monitor)

During his campaign, Assoumani appealed to the masses that if they voted “Yes” to extend the presidential term limit, tougher measures would be taken against those who are not Sunni – meaning that Shia Muslims and Christians are likely to be targeted, according to World Watch Monitor’s source.

More than 95 per cent of Comoros’s population are Sunni Muslim, while approximately 2 per cent are Catholic and just 0.1 per cent Protestant, according to figures from the World Christian Database.

Over the years, the rise radical Islamic thought among the population, government officials, religious leaders and Muslim youth groups have caused anxiety among Christians, according to the charity Open Doors International.

“In mosques and madrassas Muslim religious leaders teach anti-Christian sentiments and government officials obligate parents to send their children to madrassas,” says Open Doors. They also prohibit Christians from preaching or engaging in religious discussion in public, according to the charity.

Converts to Christianity from Islam can be prosecuted, and the converts that exist face severe discrimination from the Muslim majority, says Open Doors: “The state also denies worshipping space for Christians in general. An ultra-conservative group of radical scholars, locally known as Djaulas, are pushing the country to a more extreme view of Islamic law (sharia) in the country and are against Christians.”
