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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Morocco

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The report for [Western Sahara](#) is appended at the end of this report.

The constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Islam is the official state religion and the king is "Commander of the faithful and the Supreme Representative of the Muslim community." Non-Muslim foreign communities openly practiced their faiths.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government places certain restrictions on Christian religious materials and proselytizing. Several small religious minorities are tolerated with varying degrees of official restrictions. The Government monitored the activities of mosques and placed some restrictions on Muslims and Islamic organizations whose activities were deemed to have exceeded the bounds of religious practice and become political in nature.

While there is generally an amicable relationship among religious groups in society, converts to Christianity may face social ostracism.

U.S. government officials met regularly with members of all religious communities to promote tolerance and freedom. Officials actively promoted and facilitated meetings between the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments and visiting U.S. religious leaders, and the U.S. funded programs that promoted religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 172,320 square miles. According to the 2004 census, the population was approximately thirty million, and more than 99 percent of the citizens were Sunni Muslims.

According to Jewish community leaders, there were approximately four thousand Jews, the majority of whom resided in Casablanca. The estimated size of the Rabat Jewish community was 200 to 250. The remainder of the Jewish population was dispersed throughout the country.

The expatriate Christian community, Catholic and Protestant, consisted of approximately five thousand practicing members, although some estimates were as high as twenty-five thousand. Most Christians resided in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas.

The Baha'i community, also located in urban areas, numbered 350 to 400 persons. The Government recognizes the presence of a Shi'ite Muslim community; however, the size was unknown.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Islam is the official state religion and the king is "Commander of the faithful and the Supreme Representative of the Muslim community" with the responsibility of ensuring "respect for Islam." The Government prohibits the distribution of Christian religious materials, bans all proselytizing, and tolerates several small religious minorities with varying degrees of restrictions. The Government monitored the activities of mosques and placed other restrictions on Muslims and Islamic organizations whose activities were deemed to have exceeded the bounds of religious practice and become political in nature. Jewish and foreign Christian communities openly practiced their faiths. A small foreign Hindu community freely performed cremations and held services. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of restrictions on the religious activities of the Baha'is or Shi'ite Muslims.

The following Islamic holy days are national holidays: Eid al-Adha, Islamic New Year, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Eid al-Fitr. Other religious groups observed religious holy days without interference from government authorities.

During the reporting period, the Government did not license or approve new religious groups or religious organizations. In 2004 an English-speaking church group received nonprofit association status as the "Protestant Church." Other registered churches and associations included the Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, and Anglican churches.

The Rabat Protestant Church and other minority religious groups have been operating unfettered by government authorities since the 1970s, and registration allows the groups to make financial transactions and undertake other business as private associations and legal entities.

The Government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of the major religious groups, namely Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

The Government's annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in public schools and religious instruction in separate Jewish public schools. The Government also funded the study of Jewish culture, and its artistic, literary, and scientific heritage. In the Faculty of Letters at the University of Rabat, two professors teach Hebrew and one teaches comparative religion in the Department of Islamic Studies. Throughout the country, approximately twelve other professors teach Hebrew.

The Government continued to encourage tolerance, respect, and dialogue among the religious groups. During the reporting period, senior government officials, including the minister of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, received delegations of U.S. Christian and Jewish leaders.

King Mohammed VI established the Islamic-Judeo Observatory, a body of international scholars, to promote religious tolerance and monitor intolerance. The country was the only Arab country with a Jewish museum. In May 2006, for the second year in succession, a three-day, contemporary Christian music festival featuring foreign and local bands took place. This event was organized by a foreign Christian evangelical organization in coordination with local community leaders and officials.

The Government organizes the annual "Fez Festival of Sacred Music," which in the past has included musicians from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Native American spiritual traditions. The year 2006 marked the eleventh anniversary of the festival. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the king hosted colloquia of Islamic religious scholars that, among other matters, considered ways to encourage tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and between Islam and other religious groups. For the third consecutive year, a woman spoke during Ramadan in the presence of the king and religious scholars. A woman was also a member of the Supreme Council of the Ulema, or religious scholars.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments monitored Friday mosque sermons and the Qur'anic schools to ensure the teaching of approved doctrine. At times the authorities suppressed the activities of Islamists but generally tolerated activities limited to the propagation of Islam, education, and charity. Security forces commonly closed mosques to the public shortly after Friday services to prevent use of the premises for unauthorized political activity. The Government strictly controlled authorization to construct new mosques. Most mosques were constructed using private funds.

During academic year 2005 the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments initiated two programs. One was a graduate-level theological course, part of which focused on Christianity and Judaism. The other was a course designed to train men and women to be counselors and teachers in mosques throughout the country. Fifty women, the first group of female murshidats (guides), were assigned to mosques in May 2006.

In April 2004 King Mohammed VI, as the "Commander of the Faithful," announced plans to restructure the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments to ensure the promotion of moderate Islam and guard against imported Islamic doctrines and the preaching of extremist ideology in mosques.

In 2004 the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments took charge of and monitored the activities of mosques, placed restrictions on activities deemed to have exceeded the bounds of religious practice or become political in nature, and began to provide religious training for imams. Authorities stated that all of these measures were put in place in order to avoid exploitation of mosques for political propaganda and to prevent supportive activities such as distributing pamphlets and raising funds.

The Government does not recognize the Islamic Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), which rejects the king's spiritual authority. The JCO holds to a strict interpretation of Islam and advocates an Islamic state contrary to the constitution. The JCO continued to hold meetings, organize and participate in demonstrations, and operate two websites, although the Government did not allow the JCO to publish written materials. In April 2006 the Government started entering JCO members' houses, forcing the cessation of weekly meetings and continued closing the JCO's weekly meetings and open houses throughout May and June. JCO materials were confiscated and as many as 400 members were arrested. The vast majority of detainees were released after several hours, but at least one member was scheduled to appear in court after the reporting period.

Government informers monitored campus activities, primarily those conducted by Islamists.

According to Article 220 of the penal code, any attempt to stop one or more persons from the exercise of their religious beliefs or from attendance at religious services is unlawful and may be punished by three to six months' imprisonment and a fine of \$10 to \$50 (115 to 575 dirhams). The article applies the same penalty to "anyone who employs incitements to shake the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion." Any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert is illegal. Foreign missionaries either limit their proselytizing to non-Muslims or conduct their work quietly. The Government has cited the penal code's prohibition on proselytism in most cases in which courts ruled to expel foreign missionaries. During this reporting period, there were no reports of police questioning foreign missionaries for being in possession of Christian materials.

Citizens who convert to Christianity and other religions may face social ostracism, and a small number of converts have faced short periods of questioning or detention by authorities for proselytizing and have been denied issuance of passports. There were no reports of such occurrences during the reporting period.

On January 6, 2005, according to the foreign nongovernmental organization (NGO) Middle East Concern, police arrested on charges of proselytism a Muslim citizen who had converted to Christianity, and whose passport was found on a foreign Christian arrested for distributing Christian materials in Tetouan. On October 27, 2005, the authorities dropped the charges against the person. Middle East Concern also reported that as of mid-July 2004 authorities had either confiscated or refused to renew the passports of five citizens who had converted from Islam to Christianity. Three of the converts received their passports by August 2004, but foreign Christian leaders in the country alleged that two of them experienced police harassment and long interrogations. The remaining two received their passports by the end of the 2005 reporting period. The reports on these individuals could not be confirmed by other sources.

Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes. Muslim citizens are allowed to study at Christian and Jewish schools. A Jewish school in Casablanca includes Muslim students, and a hospital run by the Jewish community provides care to low-income citizens regardless of religion.

A small foreign Christian community operated churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without any government restrictions. Missionaries who refrain from proselytizing and conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations largely are left unhindered; however, those whose activities become public face expulsion. In March 2005 authorities expelled a South African pastor of a Protestant church in Marrakesh for not having lucrative employment, although authorities had renewed his temporary residence permit annually for five years until January 2005. The deportation followed a series of news and opinion articles in the local press concerning the presence of foreign Christian missionaries in the country, the Government's invitation to U.S. Christian leaders to visit and meet with political and religious officials, a discussion on comparative religion that took place in March in a Marrakesh classroom, and the job performance of the minister of Islamic Affairs and Endowments.

In May 2004 authorities detained for several hours and subsequently expelled seven foreign missionaries for distributing Christian materials in Marrakesh's main square.

In the past, some missionaries have been questioned by authorities or have not been granted a "temporary residence permit" enabling them to remain in the country on a long-term basis. No similar incidents occurred during this reporting period.

The Government permits the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. It generally confiscates Arabic-language Bibles, however, and refuses licenses for their importation and sale despite the absence of any law banning such books. Nevertheless, Arabic Bibles have been sold in local bookstores.

There are two sets of laws and courts pertaining to marriage, inheritance, and family matters, one for Muslims and one for Jews. The family law courts are administered, depending on the law that applies, by rabbinical and Islamic authorities who are court officials. Parliament authorizes any changes to those laws. In 2004, under the new Family Law Code (Moudawana) for Muslims, new civil judges were recruited. In 2003 the minister of justice established family courts to adjudicate divorce and child custody cases in anticipation of proposed reforms to the code. These courts addressed family matters for Muslim citizens, and the judges were trained in Shari'a (Islamic law) as applied in the country. By the end of 2005, the Ministry of Justice, often in cooperation with international NGOs, had trained 300 new judges and 60 family court judges, while 600 judges had participated in continuing education courses. Plans called for the establishment of seventy family courts with one for each province. At the end of 2004, the Government had established twenty of these courts. No new specific family courts had been established by year's end as the Government was reviewing the policy. Family matters for Jewish citizens were handled by a parallel legal system available to them.

Rabbinical authorities continue to administer family courts for Jews. Non-Qur'anic sections of Islamic law on personal status are applicable to non-Muslim and non-Jewish persons. Christians inherit according to the civil law, which reflects the changes to the family code. Jews maintain their own separate inheritance law based on Jewish religious law.

Reforms of the family law code passed in 2003 gave women the same rights as men in divorce cases, granted mothers custody of minor children, increased the marriage age to eighteen and imposed significant limitations on polygyny. The reforms also abolished codified traditions that favored male heirs based on the official interpretation of Shari'a. The new code is predicated on the establishment of family courts and the creation of a family aid fund, and it relies on the court system more than the previous law did. On February 14, 2005, the one-year anniversary of the new code, top government officials held a conference during which they presented evidence of the code's success, including statistics showing a decrease in the number of divorces, an increase in women's requests for divorces, and a decrease in polygyny requests. However, the women's rights group Ligue Democratique des Droits de la Femme (LDDF) disputed the government statistics on divorce in a February 2005 report, branding the reforms a "failure" due partly to conservative courts, to which the code provides much leeway. Implementation of the code continued throughout this reporting period. Under the criminal code, women generally are accorded the same treatment as men.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

While there is generally an amicable relationship among religious groups in society, Muslim converts to Christianity may face social ostracism.

From January 2005 until the May 2005 concert of contemporary Christian music, there was a societal debate on the influence of evangelical Christianity in the country. In spite of considerable criticism, the Government allowed the May 2005 concert to take place, and no negative incidents occurred. In May 2006 the concert was held for the second time without incident.

Foreigners attended religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals. Many citizens of all religions believe that the country is enriched by its centuries-old Jewish minority, and Jews lived in safety throughout the country during the reporting period. Annual Jewish commemorations took place around the country, and Jewish pilgrims from around the region regularly visited holy sites in the country.

Although the free expression of the Islamic faith and free academic and theological discussion of non-Islamic religions are accepted on television and radio, society discourages all public efforts to proselytize. Because many Muslims view the Baha'i Faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam and, consequently, Baha'is as apostates, most members of the Baha'i community avoided disclosing their religious affiliation; however, Baha'is' concerns for their personal safety and property did not prevent their functioning in society, and some held government jobs.

There was widespread consensus among Muslims regarding religious practices and interpretation. While some dissenters challenged the religious authority of the king and call for the establishment of a government more deeply rooted in their vision of Islam, the majority of citizens did not appear to share their view.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials encountered no interference from the Government in making contacts with members of any religious group.

U.S. government officials met regularly with religious officials, including the minister of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, Islamic religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, Christian missionaries, the leaders of the registered Christian communities, and other local Christians during the period covered by this report. A U.S. program focused on religious tolerance and freedom was held that utilized the United States as a model.

U.S. government officials met regularly with members of religious communities to promote tolerance and freedom. Officials actively promoted and facilitated meetings between the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments and visiting U.S. religious leaders. U.S. programs enabled one university professor, two journalists, and two religious leaders to study the relationship between religion and civic education in the United States.

WESTERN SAHARA

The constitution of Morocco provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Due to continuing Moroccan administrative control of the territory, the laws and restrictions regarding religious organizations and religious freedom are the same as those in the Kingdom of Morocco.

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

During the period covered by this report there were no reports of problems concerning religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government of Morocco through the U.S. embassy in Rabat and the U.S. Department of State as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The territory has an area of approximately 102,706 square miles and a population of 273 thousand. The overwhelming majority of the population was Sunni Muslim.

There was a small foreign community working for the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission in the territory (known by its French acronym, MINURSO); most of its members were not Muslims.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution of Morocco provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Due to continuing Moroccan administrative control of the territory, laws and restrictions regarding religious organizations and religious freedom are the same as those in the Kingdom of Morocco.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Restrictions on religious freedom in the territory are the same as those in the Kingdom of Morocco.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government, through the U.S. embassy in Morocco, discusses religious freedom issues with the Government of Morocco as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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