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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Morocco

Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country to be a Muslim state with full sovereignty and that Islam is the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, and says that the state guarantees to everyone the freedom to “practice his religious affairs.” The constitution states the king is the protector of Islam. It prohibits political parties, parliamentarians, and constitutional amendments from infringing upon Islam. The criminal code prohibits undermining the faith or enticing a Muslim to convert to another religion. According to human rights organizations and local Christian leaders, the government detained and questioned some Christian citizens about their beliefs and contacts with other Christians. Christian and Shia Muslim citizens stated fears of government harassment led to their decision to hold religious meetings in members’ homes. Foreign clergy said they discouraged the country’s Christian citizens from attending their churches out of fear they could be criminally charged with proselytism. Some Christian citizens reported authorities pressured Christian converts to renounce their faith. On at least two occasions during the year, the government expelled foreign individuals accused of proselytism as “a threat to public order,” rather than prosecuting them under provisions of the law that prohibit “undermining the faith.” Although the law allows registration of religious groups as associations, some minority religious groups reported government rejection of their registration requests. In May Spanish media reported the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs used the term “virus” when referring to Christians and Shia Muslims in the country. Some religious minority groups, such as the Bahai community, practiced their religion without formal registration. In October media reported that authorities prevented the Bahai community from publicly celebrating the bicentennial of the birth of the faith’s founder. The authorities introduced new religious textbooks during the school year following a review they said was aimed at removing extremist or intolerant references. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) continued to guide and monitor the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by the broadcast media, actions it said were intended to combat violent extremism. The government restricted the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam.

Some Christian, Bahai, and Shia Muslims reported societal, familial, and cultural pressure on account of their faith. Passersby reportedly attacked at least one individual during Ramadan for eating in public during fasting hours.

The Charge d’Affaires, other embassy and consulate general officers, and other U.S. government officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance in visits with key government officials, where they highlighted on a regular basis the importance of protection of religious minorities and interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 34.0 million (July 2017 estimate) and that more than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Less than 0.1 percent of the population is Shia Muslim’ according to U.S. government estimates. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, and Bahais.

According to Jewish community leaders, there are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 Jews, approximately 2,500 of whom reside in Casablanca. The Rabat and Marrakech Jewish communities each have approximately 75 members. Christian leaders estimate there are between 2,000 and 6,000 Christian citizens distributed throughout the country, although some leaders state there may be as many as 50,000. Shia Muslim leaders estimate there are tens of thousands of Shia citizens, with the largest proportion in the north. In addition, there are an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 foreign-resident Shia from Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Leaders of the Ahmadi Muslim community estimate their numbers at 600. Leaders of the Bahai community estimate there are 350-400 members throughout the country.

Foreign-resident Christian leaders estimate the foreign-resident Christian population numbers at least 30,000 Roman Catholics and 10,000 Protestants, many of whom are lifelong residents of the country whose families have resided and worked there for generations but do not hold Moroccan citizenship. There is a small foreign-resident Russian Orthodox community in Rabat and a small foreign-resident Greek Orthodox community in Casablanca. Most foreign-resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas, but small numbers of foreign Christians are present throughout the country. Many are migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, the country is a Muslim state, with full sovereignty, and Islam is the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, and says the state guarantees to every individual the freedom to practice his religious affairs. The constitution states the king holds the

Islamic title of commander of the faithful, is the protector of Islam, and is the guarantor of the freedom to practice religious affairs in the country. The constitution prohibits the enactment of laws or constitutional amendments infringing upon its provisions relating to Islam, and also recognizes the Jewish community as an integral component of society. According to the constitution, political parties may not be based on religion and may not seek to attack or denigrate Islam as one of their objectives.

The constitution and the law governing the media prohibit any individual, including members of parliament normally immune from arrest, from criticizing Islam on public platforms, such as print or online media, or in public speeches. Such expressions are punishable by imprisonment for two years and a fine of 200,000 dirhams (\$21,400).

The law penalizes anyone who “employs enticements to undermine the faith” or convert a Muslim to another faith, and provides punishments of six months to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$21 to \$53). It also provides the right to a court trial for anyone accused of such an offense. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the law. The law permits the government to expel summarily any noncitizen resident it determines to be “a threat to public order,” and the government has used this clause to expel foreigners suspected of proselytizing.

By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion is punishable by six months to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$21 to \$53). The penal code states any person known to be Muslim who breaks the fast in public during the month of Ramadan without an exception granted by religious authorities is liable to punishment of six months in prison and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$21 to \$53). It is at an owner’s discretion whether to keep a restaurant open or not during Ramadan.

The High Authority for Audiovisual Communications established by the constitution requires all eight public television stations to dedicate 5 percent of their airtime to Islamic religious content and broadcast the Islamic call to prayer five times daily.

Sunni Muslims and Jews are the only religious groups recognized in the constitution as native to the country; other faiths are viewed as foreign. A separate set of laws and special courts govern personal status matters for Jews, including functions such as marriage, inheritance, and other personal status matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Muslim judges trained in the country’s Maliki-Ashari Sunni interpretation of the relevant aspects of sharia administer the courts for personal status matters for all other religious groups. According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a Christian or Jewish woman; a Muslim woman may not marry a man of another religion unless he converts to Islam. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam and be permanent residents before they can become guardians of abandoned or orphaned children. Guardianship entails the caretaking of a child, which may last until the child reaches 18, but does not allow changing the child’s name or inheritance rights, and requires maintaining the child’s birth religion, according to orphanage directors.

Legal provisions outlined in the general tax code provide tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of recognized religious groups (Sunni Muslims and Jews) and religious groups registered as associations (some foreign Christian churches). The law does not require religious groups to register to worship privately, but to conduct business on behalf of the group or to hold public gatherings, a nonrecognized religious group must register as an association. Associations must register with local Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials in the jurisdiction of the association's headquarters in order to conduct financial transactions, have bank accounts, rent property, and address the government in the name of the group. An individual representative of a religious group that is neither recognized nor registered as an association may be held liable for any of the group's public gatherings, transactions, bank accounts, property rentals, and/or petitions to the government. The registration application must contain the name and purpose of the association; the name, nationality, age, profession, and residential address of each founder; and the address of the association's headquarters. The constitution guarantees civil society associations and nongovernmental organizations the right to organize themselves and exercise their activities freely within the scope of the constitution. The law on associations prohibits organizations that pursue activities the government regards as “illegal, contrary to good morals, or aimed at undermining the Islamic religion, the integrity of the national territory, or the monarchical regime, or which call for discrimination.”

Many foreign-resident Christian churches are registered as associations. Registered foreign-resident churches include the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican Churches, which maintain different forms of official status. The Russian Orthodox and Anglican Churches are registered as branches of international associations through the Russian and United Kingdom embassies, respectively. The Protestant and Catholic Churches, whose existence as foreign-resident churches predates the country's independence in 1956, maintain a special status recognized by the government since independence.

By law, all publicly funded educational institutions must teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings and traditions of the Maliki-Ashari school of Islamic jurisprudence. Foreign-run and privately funded schools have the choice of teaching Sunni Islam or of not including religious instruction within the school's curriculum. Private Jewish schools are able to teach Judaism.

According to the constitution, only the High Council of Ulema, a group headed and appointed by the king with representatives from all regions of the country, is authorized to issue fatwas, which become legally binding only through endorsement by the king in a royal decree and subsequent confirmation by parliamentary legislation. If the king or parliament decline to ratify a decision of the Ulema, the decision remains nonbinding and unenforced.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: The government at times reportedly detained and questioned Christian citizens about their beliefs, some of whom reported authorities pressured converts to renounce their faith. In May Spanish media reported the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs used the term “virus” when referring to Christians and Shia Muslims in the country. On at least two occasions during the year, the government expelled foreign individuals accused of proselytism as “a threat to public order,” rather than prosecuting them under provisions of the law that prohibit “undermining the faith of a Muslim.” The government monitored, and in some cases restricted, religious activities of non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims. Some religious minorities, such as the Bahai community, engaged in religious practice without formal registration. In October media reported that authorities prevented the Bahai community from publicly celebrating the bicentennial of the birth of the faith’s founder, cancelling community leaders’ reservations of banquet facilities in Meknes and Tangier. The government continued to restrict distribution of non-Islamic religious materials as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. In January the MOI banned the sale, manufacture, and import of the burqa, according to press reports, but did not ban the wearing of the garment. The government cited security reasons for its decision. The government introduced new religious textbooks following a review by the MEIA and the Ministry of Education (MOE) to remove extremist or intolerant references and promote moderation and tolerance. The MEIA continued to guide and monitor the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by the broadcast media, actions it said were intended to combat violent extremism.

In July police sentenced prominent Shia leader Abdou El Chakrani to one year in prison for financial improprieties following his May 2016 arrest. Other Shia leaders said Chakrani was targeted for his religious beliefs and his attempt to register an association affiliated with known Shia leaders called Progressive Messengers. Authorities rejected the application in 2016. According to representatives of the group, the group’s goal was to defend the rights of religious minorities and to support religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, as well as religious freedom.

On at least two occasions during the year, the government expelled foreign individuals accused of proselytism as “a threat to public order,” rather than prosecuting them under criminal law (for “undermining the faith of a Muslim”). In September authorities expelled two Dutch citizens following complaints from local citizens the couple were distributing Christian religious materials. The court ordered police from the Royal Gendarmerie to investigate. Residents informed police the two had encouraged conversions to Christianity, and police found Bibles and other Christian religious material in the home where they were staying. Upon receiving results of the Gendarmerie’s investigation, the court ordered the deportation of the two individuals under a section of law that permits the deportation of foreigners whom it deems to be a “threat to public order.”

The government allowed the operation of registered foreign-resident churches, but previously has refused requests by Shia Muslim groups to register as associations, which religious leaders and legal scholars said prevented those groups from legally gathering for religious ceremonies in public. There were no known Shia mosques. Shia representatives reported they had not attempted to register during the year.

Groups of Christian and Bahai citizens also reported they had not attempted to register with authorities, believing their requests would be denied. Nonregistered religious groups received varying treatment by authorities. Some said they had been able to practice their religion, while others reported authorities shut down their gatherings or prevented them from occurring. A number of religious groups reported they cooperated with authorities and occasionally informed them of planned large gatherings, for which authorities sometimes provided security.

In October, according to media reports, authorities prevented members of the Bahai community from publicly celebrating the bicentennial of the birth of the faith's founder by canceling community leaders' reservations of banquet facilities in Meknes and Tangier. The MOI stated that the group was not registered as an association and therefore did not have the legal authority to organize public gatherings.

Christian and Shia Muslim citizens continued to state fears of government harassment were one of the reasons they refrained from public worship and instead met discreetly in members' homes. Foreign-resident Christian church officials reported Christian citizens rarely attended their churches, and the officials did not encourage them to do so, in order to avoid official accusations of proselytizing. Some Christian citizens reported authorities pressured Christian converts to renounce their faith by informing the converts' friends, relatives, and employers of the individuals' conversion. Christian citizens stated authorities made phone or house calls several times a year to demonstrate they had lists of members of Christian networks and monitored Christian activities. Foreigners attended religious services without restriction at places of worship belonging to officially recognized churches.

In May Spanish media reported the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs used the term “virus” when referring to Christians and Shia in the country. In a follow-up explanation, the minister explained he was using a medical metaphor to explain that the people of the country are “immunized” and resilient because of Sunni Islam, and that he did not mean to insinuate any religious practice or belief was a virus. He went on to say, “The dogma does not bother us. Only the existence of an eventual political agenda or political goals is dangerous.”

In January the MOI banned the sale, production, and import of the burqa, according to press reports. The government cited security reasons for its decision. The ban did not prevent individuals from wearing burqas or making them at home for individual use.

The MEIA remained the principal government institution responsible for shaping the country's religious sphere and promoting its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The MEIA continued to provide government-required training and direction to imams and to shape the content of Friday mosque sermons by providing approved topics. It also monitored Quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considered to be inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure teaching followed approved doctrine. The government required mosques to close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for what it termed unauthorized activity, such as gatherings intended to promote extremism. The construction of new mosques, including those constructed using private funds, required authorization from the MEIA. Authorization of the MOI was a requirement for the renovation or construction of churches. The MEIA employed more than 500 chief imams and more than 200 female Muslim spiritual guides (*murshidat*) in mosques or religious institutions throughout the country. The female guides taught religious subjects and provided counsel on a variety of matters, including women's legal rights and family planning.

The government introduced new religious textbooks following a review by the MEIA and the MOE to promote moderation and tolerance. Modifications to the textbooks remained in progress. Jewish and Christian citizens stated elementary and high school curricula did not include mention of the historical legacy and current presence of their groups in the country. The government continued to fund the study of Jewish culture and heritage at universities. At the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion were course offerings in the Department of Islamic Studies. In September the minister of education announced that classes in the country's schools would be suspended on Fridays from noon until 3:00 p.m. to allow teachers and students to attend Friday prayer.

The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. Its policy remained to control the sale of all books, videotapes, and DVDs it considered extremist. The government permitted the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible was available for sale in a few bookshops for use in university religion courses. Authorities confiscated Bibles they believed were intended for use in proselytizing.

The government continued to disseminate information about Islam over dedicated state-funded television and radio channels. Television channel Assadissa (Sixth) programming was strictly religious, consisting primarily of Quran and *hadith* (authoritative sayings and deeds ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad) readings and exegesis, highlighting the government's interpretation of Islam.

According to observers, the government tolerated social and charitable activities consistent with its view of Sunni Islam. For example, the Unity and Reform Movement, which shares some leadership with the ruling Party of Justice and Development, continued to operate without restriction, according to media reports. The Unity and Reform Movement is the country's largest registered Islamic social organization. The

Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), a Sunni Islamist social movement that rejects the king's spiritual authority, remained banned but largely tolerated. It is the largest social movement in the country despite being unregistered. The JCO continued to release press statements, hold conferences, manage internet sites, and participate in political demonstrations, including organizing in July the largest demonstration since the 2011 Arab Spring. The government occasionally prevented the organization from meeting and restricted public distribution of JCO's published materials.

The monarchy continued to support the restoration of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries throughout the country, efforts it stated were necessary to preserve the country's religious and cultural heritage and to serve as a symbol of tolerance. In May the Mohammadia League of Scholars signed an agreement with the Vatican Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to create a joint committee to promote dialogue between Muslims and Christians. According to media reports, the committee planned to hold a symposium every two years, alternating between Rabat and Rome, and addressing hate speech, extremism and violence, and the exploitation of religion for political ends. In April and May the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH), the publicly funded national human rights institution independent of the elected government, met with some Christian citizens who requested greater respect for the rights of minority religions. Media reports of the meetings said the Christians stated they did not fear the government but rather extremists. In October Prince Moulay Rachid, brother of King Mohammed VI, met with the director and representatives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to discuss increased cooperation within the framework of the museum's 2007 archival exchange agreement with the national library.

At a Catholic Mass in March in honor of the fourth anniversary of the pontificate of Pope Francis, the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs addressed the diplomatic corps and government officials, conveying a message from the king.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Representatives of minority religious groups, especially Christian, Shia Muslim, and Bahai citizens, said fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families, social ridicule, employment discrimination, and potential violence against them by "extremists," were the main reasons leading them to practice their faiths discreetly.

In November citizen members of Christian, Shia, and Bahai communities held a public conference to call for greater legal protections for religious minorities. The conference organizers faced challenges in securing a venue willing to host the meeting and backlash from members of the ruling Party of Justice and Development (PJD), but were able to hold the conference without interference from the government.

Christian citizens reported social pressure to convert to Islam or renounce their Christian faith from non-Christian family and friends. Their leaders said young Christians who still lived with their Muslim families did not reveal their faith to them

because they believed they might be expelled from their homes unless they renounced Christianity. They also reported the government did not respond to complaints about frequent societal harassment.

In the weeks following media reports of the meetings between Christian citizens and the CNDH, in online comments and editorials, reactions from the public were largely negative, with some calling the group “apostates” and others suggesting that Muslims converting to Christianity had strengthened ISIS.

In June during Ramadan, a group of youths attacked a European teenager of Moroccan descent for drinking juice in public during fasting hours. The girl’s family reportedly explained that she, like her European father, was Christian and not Muslim, and therefore not fasting.

Members of the Bahai Faith said they were open about their faith with family, friends, and neighbors, but feared extremist elements in society would try to do them harm, leading them to ask local police for protection at their gatherings.

Shia Muslims said in some areas, particularly in large cities in the north, they did not hide their faith from family, friends, or neighbors, but that many avoided disclosing their religious affiliation in areas where their numbers were smaller.

Jewish citizens said they lived and attended services at synagogues in safety. They said they were able to visit religious sites regularly and to hold annual commemorations.

The media continued to report women had difficulty finding employment, in the private sector and with the army and police, if they wore a hijab or other head covering. When they did obtain employment, women reported employers either encouraged or required them to remove their headscarves during working hours.

Muslim citizens continued to study at private Christian and private Jewish schools, reportedly primarily because these schools maintained a reputation for offering superior education. According to school administrators, Muslim students constituted a significant portion of the students at Jewish schools in Casablanca.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Charge d’Affaires, other embassy and consulate general officers, and visiting U.S. government officials met with senior government officials, including the minister of interior and the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs, to promote religious freedom and tolerance, including the rights of minority communities. In March, the Charge attended a Catholic Mass in Rabat Cathedral to honor Pope Francis’ fourth anniversary as pope. In May the Charge attended a ceremony at the historic St. John’s Anglican Church in Casablanca with government officials, launching an expansion and

renovation project that was partially funded by the king. In October embassy officials met with Jewish groups organizing a conference on religious tolerance and the history of the country’s Jewish community. Also in October a delegation from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and consulate officials met with the country’s leaders to discuss continuing collaboration between the museum and the country’s National Library to promote religious tolerance and awareness. Museum officials extended an invitation to the king to attend a special ceremony at the museum to commemorate his late grandfather for his “courageous protection of Jews facing Vichy France persecution during World War II.” In November the Charge, the Consul General in Casablanca, and other embassy officials highlighting the history of religious tolerance during World War II. The program included official visits to the Anglican Church of Casablanca and to a Jewish synagogue damaged during the war and recently refurbished with a new museum exhibition with funding from the king. Embassy officers met regularly with Muslim religious scholars to discuss religious tolerance and education reform, and with leaders of the Jewish community, Christian foreign residents, and leaders of unregistered Christian, Shia, and Bahai groups, as well as others, to discuss issues facing the various groups. Embassy and consulate officers also regularly met with Jewish groups visiting Morocco to explore the country’s Jewish history. The embassy fostered programs designed to highlight religious tolerance and the need to fight radicalization and counter violent extremism.

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