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Morocco

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The Constitution states that Islam is the official state religion; however, non-Muslim communities openly practice their faith.

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, and several small religious minorities are tolerated with varying degrees of official restrictions. The Government monitors the activities of mosques and places other restrictions on Muslims and Islamic organizations whose activities are deemed to have exceeded the bounds of religious practice and become political in nature.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, converts to Christianity generally face social ostracism.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 172,320 square miles. According to the 2004 census, the population was 29,891,708. The census also states that 99 percent of the citizens are Sunni Muslims.

The Jewish community numbers approximately 5,000 and resides primarily in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas, as well as in some smaller cities throughout the country. The expatriate Christian community, Catholic and Protestant, consists of 5,000 practicing members, although estimates of Christians residing in the country at any particular time range up to 25,000.

Most Christians reside in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas. The Baha'i community, also located in those regions, numbers 350 to 400 persons.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides that Islam is the official religion and designates the King as "Commander of the Faithful" with the responsibility of ensuring "respect for Islam." The Constitution also provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government places certain restrictions on Christian religious materials and proselytizing, and several small religious minorities are tolerated with varying degrees of official restrictions. The Government monitors the activities of mosques and places other restrictions on Muslims and Islamic organizations whose activities are deemed to have exceeded the bounds of religious practice and become political in nature. Jewish and foreign Christian communities openly practice their faiths. A small foreign Hindu community may freely perform cremations and hold services. In the past, the Government reportedly has forbidden Baha'is from meeting or participating in communal activities; however, there were no reports that their activities were restricted during the period covered by this report.

The following Islamic holy days are considered national holidays: Eid al Adha, Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet, and Eid al Fitr. Other religions observe religious holy days without interference from government authorities.

During the reporting period, the Government did not license or approve new religions or religious organizations. In March 2004, an English-speaking church group received nonprofit association status as

the "Protestant Church." Other registered churches and associations include 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 other plans as private associations and legal entities. In 2002, Al Ghadir became the first Shi'a organization to ask for official status, but at the end of the reporting period, official status had not been granted.

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.

The teaching of Islam in public schools is funded in the Government's annual education budget. The annual budget also funds religious instruction in Jewish public schools. The Government has funded several efforts to study the cultural, artistic, literary, and scientific heritage of Jewish citizens. 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 12 more professors teach Hebrew.

The Government continues to encourage tolerance, respect, and dialogue among religions. During the reporting period, senior government officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, have received delegations of American Christian and Jewish leaders and Turkish Jewish leaders.

King Mohammed VI established the Islamic-Judeo Observatory, a body of international scholars to promote religious tolerance and monitor intolerance. In April, the country hosted the Muslim-Judeo dialogue in Marrakech. It is the only Arab nation with a Jewish museum. The country hosted a concert of contemporary Christian music to perform alongside local bands during a 3-day concert in May. This event was preceded by a foreign business development conference in Fez organized by a foreign Christian evangelical.

The Government organizes the annual "Fez Festival of Sacred Music," which includes musicians from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Native American spiritual traditions. This year marked the eleventh anniversary of the festival. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the King hosts colloquia of Islamic religious scholars that, among other issues, consider ways to encourage tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and between Islam and other religions. For the second consecutive year, a woman spoke during Ramadan in the presence of the King and religious scholars. A woman is also a member of the Supreme Council of Ulemas, or religious scholars.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

In April 2004, King Mohammed VI, in his capacity as chief religious authority, announced plans to restructure the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to ensure the promotion of moderate Islam and guard against imported Islamic doctrines and extremists preaching in mosques.

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

In June 2003, several preachers and religious counselors were accused of exploiting mosques for political purposes, such as promoting Islamist parties. The Government continued to monitor sermons and mosque practices during the reporting period.

The Government does not recognize the Islamic Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), which rejects the King's spiritual authority, as a political movement. However, 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.

Restrictions on academic freedom prevented open debate on Islam. Government informers monitored campus activities, mostly Islamist.

Any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert is illegal.

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 3 to 6 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." 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 expelled foreign missionaries. During this reporting period, there were reports of police questioning foreign missionaries because they were carrying Christian materials.

Citizens who convert to Christianity and other religions generally 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.

According to the foreign non-governmental organization Middle East Concern, on January 6, police arrested for proselytism a Christian convert from Islam, Hamid al-Madany, whose passport was found on a foreign Christian arrested for distributing Christian materials in Tetouan. At the end of the reporting period, al-Madany was free on bail, with his next hearing set for October 2005. 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 interrogation sessions. The remaining two received their passports by the end of the 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; however, until 6 years ago, the authorities had jailed some converts based on references to Islamic law that prohibit conversion. Nevertheless, 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 operates 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, authorities expelled a South African pastor of a Protestant church in Marrakech for not having lucrative employment, although authorities had renewed his temporary residence permit annually for 5 years until January. 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 American Christian leaders to visit and meet with political and religious officials; a discussion on comparative religion that took place in March in a Marrakech classroom; and the job performance of the Minister of Islamic Affairs and Endowments.

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

In the past, some other 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.

The Government permits the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish, but it confiscates Arabic-language Bibles 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.

Since 1983, the Government has forbidden the small Baha'i community from meeting or participating in communal activities; however, there were no reports during this reporting period that the Ministry of the Interior summoned Baha'is for questioning or denied them passports, as had occurred in past years. Small groups of Baha'i meet in private homes for communal worship without interference from the state.

There are two sets of laws and courts--one for Jews and one for Muslims--pertaining to marriage, inheritance, and family matters. 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. Under the new Family Law Code for Muslims, new civil judges were recruited. By February 2004, 160 judges had completed training in the reforms of the personal status code, and the Government reported that 20 family courts were operational. Plans called for the establishment of 70 family courts with 1 for each province.

Rabbinical authorities will continue to administer family courts for Jews. Non-Qur'anic sections of Muslim 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 tradition.

Women traditionally have experienced various forms of legal and cultural discrimination in criminal and civil law, which is based on the official interpretation of Shari'a. In 2003, the Parliament passed reforms of the Personal Status Code that gave women the same rights as men in divorce cases and granted mothers custody of minor children, increased the marriage age from 15 to 18, and imposed limitations on polygamy that make it all but impossible to practice it. The reforms also abolished obsolete codified traditions that favored male heirs based on the official interpretation of Shari'a. For example, under the revised code grandchildren on the daughter's side of the family may inherit from their grandparents. The reforms are being implemented and have received positive feedback from women's groups. They are predicated on the establishment of family courts and the creation of a family aid fund, and they rely more heavily on the court system than did the previous law. On February 14, the 1-year anniversary of the new family code, or Moudawana, top government officials held a conference in which they presented evidence of the new 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 polygamy requests. However, the women's rights group Ligue Democratique des Droits de la Femme (LDDF) disputed the government statistics on divorce in a February 26 report, branding the reforms a "failure" due partly to conservative courts, to which the code leaves much leeway.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, converts to Christianity generally face social ostracism.

From January until the May concert of contemporary Christian music, there was an ongoing societal debate on the influence of evangelical Christianity in the country. In January, the French language weekly *Le Journal* reported that an Istiqlal (Nationalist Party) party member, Jilali Abouali, challenged the Minister of Islamic Affairs in Parliament about allowing Christian evangelical missionaries into the country. In April, an Islamist Arabic-daily newspaper, *Attajdid*, carried an editorial by Habib Choubani, a member of parliament representing the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD), charging that evangelicals were invading and that the Government, by permitting the concert, was undermining the country's "spiritual security." In spite of considerable criticism, the Government allowed the May concert to take place and no negative incidents occurred.

Foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals. Residents of all religions generally say the country is enriched by its centuries-old Jewish minority, and for the most part Jews lived throughout the country in safety. In September 2003, a Jewish merchant was murdered in an apparently religiously motivated killing. During the May 2003 terrorist attacks, members of the Salafiya Jihadia targeted a Jewish community center in Casablanca. After the attacks, Jews marched in solidarity with Muslims to condemn terrorism. There have been thousands of arrests and many prosecutions of persons tied to the May bombing and other extremist activity. Annual Jewish commemorations took place around the country as normal, and Jewish pilgrims from around the region regularly come to holy sites in the country. There were no reports of attacks on Jews during the reporting period.

Although free expression of Islamic faith and free academic and theological discussion of non-Islamic religions are accepted on television and radio, society discourages public efforts to proselytize. Most citizens view such public acts as provocative threats to law and order in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. In addition, society expects public respect for the institutions and mores of Islam, although private behavior and beliefs are unregulated and unmonitored. Because many Muslims view the Baha'i Faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam, most members of the tiny Baha'i community maintain a low religious profile; however, Baha'is live freely and without fear for their persons or property, and some hold government jobs.

There is widespread consensus among Muslims regarding religious practices and interpretation. While some dissenters challenge 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 do not appear to share their view.

Unlike in the past, there were no incidents of religious intolerance in the media or in school textbooks during the period covered by this report.

In May, an interfaith service at the Catholic Cathedral in Rabat commemorated the death of Pope John Paul II. Senior government officials, including some ministers and palace advisors, attended the event. The ceremony featured Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious speakers.

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.

Embassy officials met regularly with religious officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs, 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.

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