



Morocco

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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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 provides 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 in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of approximately 172,320 square miles, and its population is 31,167,783. An estimated 99 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims. The Jewish community numbers approximately 5,000 persons and resides predominantly in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas, as well as some smaller cities throughout the country. The foreign Christian community (Roman 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 reside in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas. Also located in Rabat and Casablanca, the Baha'i community 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. Christian and Jewish communities openly practice their faiths. A small foreign Hindu community may perform cremations and hold services. In the past, Baha'is reportedly have been forbidden to meet or participate in communal activities; however, there were no reports that their activities were restricted during the period covered by this report.

The Government does not license or approve religions or religious organizations. The Government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the observance of the major religions.

The teaching of Islam in public schools is funded in the Government's annual education budget, as are other curriculum subjects. 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, including creating a chair for the study of comparative religions including the study of Latin and Hebrew at the University of Rabat. In 2000 the King declared that 100 mosques throughout the

country would be used as teaching centers to fight illiteracy. The King designated 200 unemployed university graduates to administer the literacy courses on Islam civic education and hygiene to 10,000 citizens between the ages of 15 and 45 during the program's pilot stages, which began in 2000. According to the Ministry of Habbos and Islamic Affairs, since the project began, approximately 43,000 citizens have received training. During the period covered by this report, the King proposed increasing the number of teachers and providing vocational training for the teachers.

The Government continues to encourage tolerance and respect among religions. In March 2002, the Government invited Israel to attend the International Parliamentary Union meeting in Marrakech, although there were protests against this decision because of the deteriorating situation in the West Bank. During the King's April 2002 visit to the U.S., he met with prominent Jewish figures and with leaders of the Conference of Presidents of the major American Jewish organizations. During this meeting, the King invited participants to visit the country.

The Government organizes an annual event called the "Fez Festival of Sacred Music," which includes musicians who represent many religions. This was the first year that the festival branched beyond Islam, Christianity, and Judaism to include Native American, Hindu, and Buddhist spiritual traditions. In the past, the Government has organized numerous symposia among local and international clergy, priests, rabbis, imams, and other spiritual leaders to examine ways to reduce religious intolerance and to promote interfaith dialog. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the King hosts a colloquia of Islamic religious scholars that, among other issues, examine ways to promote tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and between Islam and other religions.

The King personally ordered an interfaith ceremony to be held at the Catholic cathedral in Rabat in honor of the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. The ceremony, attended by the Prime Minister and most of his cabinet, featured Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious speakers.

The following religious holidays are considered national holidays: Eid al Adha, Islamic New Year, the Prophet Mohammed's Birthday, and Eid al Fitr.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs monitors Friday mosque sermons and the Koranic 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.

The Government bars the Islamic Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), which does not recognize the King's spiritual authority, as a political party and continued to block the publication of JCO newspapers and websites.

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 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 in order 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 cited the prohibition on conversion in the Penal Code in most cases in which courts expelled foreign missionaries. In February the Government used this provision to prosecute 14 teenagers who listened to heavy metal and hard rock music and who embraced elements of an international lifestyle associated with that music which the prosecution characterized as un-Islamic. The cases were thrown out on appeal in April, and society widely condemned the prosecutions for overstepping the bounds of religious concerns.

Citizens who convert to Christianity and other religions generally face social ostracism, and a small number of persons have faced short periods of questioning or detention by the authorities. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the Criminal or Civil Codes; however, until 4 years ago, the authorities had jailed some converts on the basis of references to Islamic law. Christian citizens sometimes still are called in for questioning by the authorities.

A small foreign Christian community operates churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without any government restrictions or licensing requirements. Missionaries who conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations largely are left unhindered; however, those whose activities become public face expulsion. Although no expulsions have occurred since 1998, some missionaries have been called in for questioning 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 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 small Baha'i community has been forbidden to meet or participate in communal activities; however, there were no reports that the Ministry of the Interior summoned Baha'is for questioning or denied them passports, as had occurred in past years.

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 run, depending on the law that applies, by rabbinical and Islamic authorities who are court officials. Parliament authorizes any changes to those laws. Non-Koranic sections of Muslim law on personal status are applicable to non-Muslim and non-Jewish persons.

Women suffer various forms of legal and cultural discrimination, in part because of the codification of Islamic tenets in criminal and civil law.

The civil-law status of women is governed by the Code of Personal Status (sometimes referred to as the "Moudawana") which is based on the Maliki school of Islamic law. Women's groups still complain of unequal treatment, particularly under the laws governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance, despite 1993 reforms to the Code of Personal Status. To marry, a woman generally is required to obtain the permission of her legal guardian, usually her father. Only in rare circumstances may she act on her own behalf as her own guardian. It is far easier for men to obtain divorces than for women. Under Islamic law and tradition, rather than asking for a divorce, a man simply may repudiate his wife outside of court. Under the 1993 personal status, a woman's presence in court is required for her husband to divorce her, although women's groups report that this law is frequently ignored. While there are reports that some officials refuse to order a divorce without the wife being present, despite offers of bribes, women's groups complain that men resort to ruses to evade the legal restrictions. The divorce may be finalized even over the woman's objections, although in such cases the court grants her unspecified allowance rights.

A woman seeking a divorce has few practical alternatives. She may offer her husband money to agree to a divorce (known as a *khol'a* divorce). The husband must agree to the divorce and is allowed to specify the amount to be paid, without limit. According to women's groups, many men pressure their wives to pursue this kind of divorce. A woman also may file for a judicial divorce if her husband takes a second wife, if he abandons her, or if he physically abuses her; however, divorce procedures in these cases are lengthy and complicated. In 1998 the Minister of Islamic Affairs proposed additions to the basic marriage contract that would outline the rights and duties agreed upon between husband and wife and permit legal recourse for the enforcement of the contract.

Under the Criminal Code, women generally are accorded the same treatment as men, but this is not the case for family and estate law, which is based on the Code of Personal Status. Under the Code of Personal Status, women inherit only half as much as male heirs. Moreover, even in cases in which the law provides for equal status, cultural norms often prevent a woman from exercising those rights. For example, when a woman inherits property, male relatives may pressure her to relinquish her interest.

In March 2001, the Government created a new commission for reforming the Personal Status Code, and the King publicly urged the Commission to work on proposals to improve the application of existing laws and on a longer term "substantial reform" of the code. Islamists and some other traditional segments of society firmly opposed the King's proposal, especially with respect to its more controversial elements, such as reform of women's legal status in marriage and family law issues. In 2001 a number of women's groups formed a coalition called the "Spring of Equality" to protest the lack of progress in reforming the Personal Status Code. The "Spring of Equality" continued to protest the lack of progress throughout 2002. In December 2002, the chairman of the Moudawana Advisory Commission, Supreme Court President Driss Dahak, announced that the Commission would not be able to complete its work by the end of the year, as originally planned. On January 23, the King replaced Dahak as chairman with Mohamed Boucetta, a former Foreign Minister.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Islamist dissident Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, who spent 11 years under house arrest for refusing to acknowledge the religious authority of the King, continued to preside openly over the JCO. Members of the JCO remain subject to constant surveillance. The JCO continues to maintain an active presence on university campuses; however the Government monitors Islamist campus activities.

The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) claims that 2 members of the "Group of 26," an Islamist group involved in smuggling arms into the country from Algeria in the mid-1980s, remain in prison. The other 24 members completed their sentences or otherwise have been released.

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 religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, converts to Christianity generally face social ostracism. Foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals, and Jews live throughout the country in safety. While 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 even hold government jobs.

There is widespread consensus among Muslims regarding religious practices and interpretation. Other sources of popular consensus are the councils of ulemas, unofficial religious scholars who serve as monitors of the monarchy and the actions of the Government. Because the ulemas traditionally hold the power to legitimize or delegitimize kings through their moral authority, government policies closely adhere to popular and religious expectations. While dissenters such as Sheikh Yassine and his followers 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 views.

The anxiety of Jewish citizens has increased as the situation in the Middle East has deteriorated during 2002. In May 2002, Imam Zamzami, who is affiliated with the Party of Justice and Development (PJD, the officially recognized Islamist party), made openly anti-Semitic remarks. The press criticized him severely for not differentiating between Jews who supported Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and those who did not. In early 2002, the police increased the security at synagogues and Jewish community facilities.

On May 16, five terrorist bombings killed 44 people, including 12 suicide attackers, in Casablanca. Locations associated with Jewish people may have been deliberate targets, although no Jews were killed. King Mohammed VI visited the bombing sites and victims in hospitals. On May 25, Muslims and Jews marched in a large demonstration in Casablanca against terrorism, with both Muslims and Jews marching together. On May 18, near Essaouira, a number of Jews celebrated a rabbi buried there almost 160 years ago, and the governor of Essaouira attended some of the ceremonies. Other annual Jewish commemorations took place around the country normally.

There were no incidents of religious intolerance in the media or in school textbooks during the period covered by this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. U.S. Embassy officials encountered no interference from the Government in making contacts with members of the JCO.

U.S. Embassy officials also meet regularly with religious officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Islamic religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, and Christian missionaries. Embassy officials also established contact with local Christians during the period covered by this report.

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