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Morocco

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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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 as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of approximately 172,320 square miles, and its population is 32,209,101. 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, including Moroccan citizens who have converted to Christianity. Most of the country's Christians reside in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas. The Baha'i community, also located in Rabat and Casablanca, 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 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 religious holidays are considered national holidays: Eid al Adha, Islamic New

Year, the Prophet Mohammed's Birthday, and Eid al Fitr. Other religions observe religious holidays without interference from government authorities.

In March, an English-speaking church group received nonprofit association status as the "Protestant Church of Rabat." Other registered churches and associations include the Evangelical, Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, and Anglican churches. While the Rabat Protestant Church and other minority religious groups have been operating unfettered by government authorities since the 1970s, registration allows the groups to make financial transactions and other plans as private associations and legal entities. In 2002 the Shiite organization Al Ghadir asked for official status, the first time for a Shiite association. Authorities have not yet given a response.

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 and the study of Latin and Hebrew at the University of Rabat.

The Government continues to encourage tolerance, respect, and dialogue among religions. In the past year, King Mohammed VI or the Minister of Islamic Affairs has received the Archbishop of Athens, delegations of American Christian and Jewish leaders, the Grand Rabbi of Jerusalem, and the chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel. The country has the only Jewish museum in an Arab nation.

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 tenth anniversary of the festival. In the past, the Government organized numerous symposia among local and international clergy, priests, rabbis, imams, and other spiritual leaders to examine ways to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. 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.

An interfaith service at the Catholic Cathedral in Rabat took place in March to commemorate the victims of the March 11 terrorist attacks in Madrid. Most senior government officials, including many ministers, attended the event. The ceremony featured Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious speakers.

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.

In April, 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.

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 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 prohibition on conversion in the penal code in most cases in which courts expelled foreign missionaries.

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. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil Codes; however, until 5 years ago, the authorities had jailed some converts on the basis of references to Islamic law. Nevertheless, Muslim citizens are allowed to study at Christian and Jewish schools.

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 May authorities detained and expelled seven foreign missionaries, including four Americans, for distributing Christian materials in Marrakech's main square. 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.

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 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 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, judges will be retrained and new civil judges will be recruited. Rabbinical authorities will continue to administer family courts for Jews. Non-Koranic 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 recent change to the family code. Jewish citizens maintain their own separate inheritance law based on Jewish tradition. The Catholic Church may legally perform marriages for citizens who are confirmed Catholics.

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. However, in December 2003, the Parliament passed reforms of the Personal Status Code that give women the same rights as men in divorce cases and grant mothers custody of minor children, increase the marriage age from 15 to 18, and impose limitations on polygamy that make it all but impossible to practice. The reforms also abolish obsolete codified traditions, based on the official interpretation of Shari'a, favoring male heirs. For example, 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 the previous law.

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.

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 Jewish citizens lived throughout the country in safety. However, 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 normally, and Jewish pilgrims from around the region regularly come to holy sites in the country.

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 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 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.

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.

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 the JCO.

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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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35504pf.htm)