



*Morocco (33)*

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:  
Morocco**

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## MOROCCO

Islam is the official religion and, although the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, in practice only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are tolerated officially. Baha'is face restrictions on the practice of their faith. The Government monitors the activities of mosques and places some restrictions on Christian religious materials.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Relations between majority and minority religions are amicable. Since July 23, 1999, when King Mohammed VI succeeded his father, the late King Hassan II, who ruled for 38 years, the new King has continued to uphold a tradition of respect for interfaith dialog. Converts to Christianity sometimes 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. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

#### 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." Although the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are tolerated in practice; however, in 1996 a small foreign Hindu community received the right to perform cremations and to hold services. Other foreign communities enjoy similar religious privileges. However, Baha'is face restrictions on the practice of their faith. The Government monitors the activities of mosques.

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.

#### Religious Demography

Ninety-nine percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims. The Jewish community numbers approximately 5,000 persons and predominantly

resides 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 a little more than 5,000 members. Most reside in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas. Also located in Rabat and Casablanca, the Baha'i community numbers 350 to 400 persons. There are few practicing atheists in the country; most atheists reportedly are university students.

The teaching of Islam in public schools benefits from discretionary funding in the Government's annual education budget, as do other curriculum subjects. The annual budget also provides funds for religious instruction to the parallel system of Jewish public schools. The Government has funded several efforts to study the cultural, artistic, literary, and scientific heritage of Moroccan Jews. In 1998 the Government created a chair for the study of comparative religions at the University of Rabat.

The Government regularly organizes events to encourage tolerance and respect among religions. In April and May 2000, the Government hosted the first meeting of the "Traveling Faculty of the Religions of the Book" at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane. Royal counselor Andre Azoulay, a leading Jewish citizen, spoke of the importance of interfaith respect and dialog in front of major Islamic, Jewish, and Christian figures from around the world.

The Government annually organizes in May the "Fez Festival of Sacred Music," which includes musicians from many religions. The Government has organized in the past numerous symposiums among local and international clergy, priests, rabbis, imams and other spiritual leaders to examine ways to reduce religious intolerance and to promote interfaith dialog. Each year during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the King hosts colloquiums of Islamic religious scholars to examine ways to promote tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and between Islam and other religions.

#### Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The small Baha'i community has been forbidden to meet or participate in communal activities since 1983. However, during the period covered by this report, no members of the Baha'i community were summoned to the Ministry of the Interior for questioning concerning their faith and meetings, as had occurred in past years. For the second year in a row, there were no reports of Baha'is being denied passports because of their religion.

Islamic law and tradition call for strict punishment of any Muslim who converts to another faith. Citizens who convert to Christianity and other religions sometimes face social ostracism, and in the past a small number have faced short periods of questioning or detention by the authorities. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the Criminal or Civil Codes; however, the authorities have jailed some converts on the basis of references to Koranic law.

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 of imprisonment and a fine of \$10 (103 dirhams) to \$50 (515 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 in the Penal Code on conversion in most cases in which courts expelled foreign missionaries.

During the period covered by this report, there were no known cases of foreigners being denied entry into the country because they were carrying Christian materials, as had occurred in 1998 and the first half of 1999.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs monitors Friday mosque sermons and the Koranic schools to ensure the teaching of approved doctrine. The authorities sometimes 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.

Since the time of the French Protectorate (1912-1956), a small foreign Christian community has opened churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without any restriction or licensing requirement being imposed. Missionaries who conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations largely are left unhindered. Those whose activities become public face expulsion.

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 reportedly have been sold in local bookstores.

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 applied to non-Muslim and non-Jewish persons. Alternatively, non-Muslim and non-Jewish foreigners in Morocco may refer to their embassies or consulates for marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other personal issues if they choose not to adhere to Moroccan law.

#### Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

After 11 years of house arrest for refusing to acknowledge the religious authority of King Hassan II, Islamist dissident Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine was allowed to leave his Sale home on May 16, 2000. Yassine's release came after a May 10 statement by the Minister of Interior before Parliament that the Sheikh "leaves and returns to his residence as he likes. He receives visitors and holds meetings." The Minister also said that Sheikh Yassine was free to take his case to court if he believed that his rights were being abused. Subsequent to the lifting of his house arrest, Sheikh Yassine received at his home leading council members of his Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) on May 17, attended a Sale mosque prayer service on May 19, and gave a May 20 press conference widely attended by domestic and foreign media representatives.

During the period covered by this report, books, articles, and audio cassettes published and produced by Yassine were sold at some bookstores. Editorials calling for the Sheikh's release prior to his liberation were published without impediment. The JCO maintains an active presence on university campuses and occasionally organized, prior to Yassine's release, protests of his lengthy house arrest. However, prominent members of the JCO are subject to constant surveillance and sometimes encounter problems obtaining passports and other necessary documents. In addition, after Yassine's release, the Government banned the JCO's popular summer camps, which were used to garner and increase support for the organization.

During the period covered by this report, officials of the Gendarmerie Royale summoned several members of the foreign Christian community for questioning concerning the practice of their faith. After 8 years of residence in the country, one U.S. citizen in the community failed to receive annual renewal of his resident's visa after Gendarmerie Royale officials began an investigation into his religious activities. The investigation reportedly is still underway. Currently the U.S. citizen faces no problem residing in, or exiting and returning to, the country.

Fewer than 50 Islamists are serving sentences for offenses that range from arms smuggling to participating in a bomb attack on a hotel in Marrakech. However, a small number of these prisoners remain in prison for having called for an Islamic state in 1983.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

#### Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

#### Section II. Societal Attitudes

Tolerance is widespread, and relations between majority and minority

religions are amicable. Foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals, and Jews live throughout the Kingdom in safety. While free expression of Islamic faith and even the free academic and theological discussion of non-Islamic religions are accepted on television and radio, public efforts to proselytize are frowned upon by society. Most citizens view such public acts as provocative threats to law and order in an overwhelmingly observant 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, albeit discreetly.

Because the populace is overwhelmingly Muslim, because Islam is the religion of the State, and because the King enjoys temporal and spiritual authority through his role as "Commander of the Faithful," there is widespread consensus among Muslims about 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 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.

### **Section III. U.S. Government Policy**

During the period covered by this report, embassy officers continued to raise religious freedom issues in an effort to help resolve the few outstanding cases of restrictions on religious freedom. Prior to the release of Sheikh Yassine, the Embassy discussed his house arrest with government interlocutors, Sheikh Yassine's lawyer, his family, and some of his associates. Similarly, embassy officers sought openly to meet directly with Sheikh Yassine prior to his release and were informed by credible sources that "as a matter of principle" he would not meet with either journalists or diplomats. Prior to and after Yassine's release, embassy officers who sought to meet with Sheikh Yassine, members of his family, and his close associates encountered no interference from the Government in seeking these contacts.

The U.S. Consulate in Casablanca investigated the case of the U.S. citizen who has not yet had his residence permit renewed. The Consulate ascertained from the police that no formal charges exist against the U.S. citizen. The Embassy currently remains in contact with the citizen.

The Ambassador and embassy officials also meet regularly with religious officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Islamic religious scholars, the leader of the Jewish community, and local

Christian leaders and missionaries. The Embassy maintains contacts with the small Baha'i community as well.

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[Near East and North Africa Index](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [International Religious Freedom](#) | [Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) |