

2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Morocco

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect freedoms of worship and conscience, but the government restricted attempts to convert Moroccans from Maliki Islam. The constitution stipulates that Islam is the official state religion and designates the king as "Commander of the Faithful and Defender of the Community and the Faith" in the country. The government continued to respect the right of the large majority of citizens to practice their religion, although government policies discouraged conversion from Islam and prohibited efforts by non-Muslims to proselytize. Non-Muslim foreign communities generally practiced their faith openly. The law permits Sunni Muslims of the Maliki school of Islam to proselytize, but it prohibits efforts to convert Sunni Muslims to other religions. Some Moroccan Christians reported increased police harassment. The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials as well as some Islamic materials that it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki school of Sunni Islam to which the monarchy adheres. Several small religious groups practiced with varying degrees of official restriction. The government monitored the activities of religious groups and placed restrictions on individuals and groups when it deemed their actions exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, mainly involving converts from Islam to other religions. Christians continued to report societal scrutiny and pressure from non-Christian family and friends. Jews lived in safety throughout the country.

The Ambassador and embassy staff discussed religious freedom with the government within the context of official visits and on other occasions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 32.6 million (July 2013 estimate). More than 99 percent is Sunni Muslim. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Shia Muslims, 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 and are the remnants of a much larger community that has mostly emigrated. The Rabat and Marrakesh Jewish communities each have about 100 members. The remainder of the Jewish population is dispersed throughout the country. That population is mostly elderly.

The predominantly Roman Catholic and Protestant foreign resident Christian community consists of approximately 5,000 practicing members, although some Protestant and Catholic clergy estimate the number to be as high as 25,000. Most foreign resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas. Various local Christian leaders estimate that there are 4,000 citizen Christians (mostly ethnic Amazigh) who regularly attend "house" churches and live predominantly in the south. Some Christian leaders estimate that there may be as many as 8,000 Christian citizens throughout the country, but many reportedly do not meet regularly due to fear of government surveillance and social persecution.

The Catholic and French Protestant (referred to as the Eglise Evangelique au Maroc, or EEM) churches have buildings throughout many cities in the country. There are two Anglican churches, located in Casablanca and Tangier. The Russian Orthodox Church holds services in a building in Rabat. The Greek Orthodox Church owns a building in Casablanca, where it holds services. The Association Marocaine des Eglises Protestantes (AMEP) churches, a network of autonomous foreign resident Protestant church communities, generally rent or share buildings.

There are an estimated 3,000 to 8,000 Shia Muslims, most of them foreign residents from Lebanon or Iraq, but including a few Moroccan citizens. Followers of several Sufi Muslim orders across the Maghreb and West Africa undertake joint annual pilgrimages to the country. There are 350-400 Bahais in urban areas, particularly in Tangier.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect freedoms of worship and conscience, but restrict attempts to convert Moroccans from Maliki Islam. The constitution stipulates that Islam is the religion of the state and that the state guarantees the free exercise of religion. The constitution also designates the king as "Commander of the Faithful and Defender of the Community and the Faith" in the country.

All citizens, including members of Parliament, who are normally immune to arrest, may be prosecuted on charges of expressing opinions injurious to Islam. The law permits Sunni Muslims of the Maliki school to proselytize, but prohibits others from attempting to convert Sunni Muslims of the Maliki school to other religions. The government tolerates several small religious groups with varying degrees of restrictions, but prohibits the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials. The government monitors the activities of mosques and of non-Muslim religious groups, and places some restrictions on members of religious groups when it deems their actions have exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) provides guidance on and monitors Friday mosque sermons and the quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considers inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure teaching follows approved doctrine. The government also monitors university campuses and religious activities, primarily those conducted by Islamists. At times the authorities suppress the activities of politically active religious groups, such as the banned yet tolerated Justice and Charity Organization (JCO, or al-Adl wa al-Ihsan), but generally tolerate activities limited to the propagation of Sunni Islam, education, and charity. The MEIA also tries to control the sale of what it considers extremist books, videotapes, and DVDs. The government requires that mosques close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for unauthorized political activity. The government must authorize the construction of all new mosques, although mosques may be constructed using private funds. There are no known Shia mosques in the country.

By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worship or from attending worship services of any religion may be punished by six months to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 115 to 575 dirhams (\$14 to \$71). The law applies the same penalty to "anyone who employs enticements to undermine the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion." It also provides the right to a court trial for anyone accused of such an offense. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.

The law permits the government to summarily expel any resident alien it determines to be "a threat to public order" even where other laws require due process first. The government has cited this law in the past to expel or refuse entry to foreign Christians accused of proselytizing.

There is a separate set of laws and courts with authority over personal status matters for Jews, covering issues such as marriage, inheritance, and other family matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Judges trained in the country's interpretation of Islamic law (sharia) administer the courts for personal status matters for those of all other religious groups. Christians, however, inherit according to civil law. There are no other legal mechanisms recognizing the Christian community (or other non-Muslims) in the same way the state recognizes the Jewish community. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam before they can become guardians of abandoned children. Pursuant to a 2012 Ministry of Justice circular, guardianship is restricted to qualified individuals who permanently reside in Morocco. According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam.

The law restricting media freedom prohibits expression deemed critical of Islam. Such expression may be punishable by imprisonment.

By law only the High Council of Ulema, a group appointed by the king with representatives from all regions of the country, may issue scholarly religious decrees (fatwas). A separate, Brussels-based Council of Ulema provides religious guidance for some of the more than three million Moroccan citizens living abroad.

The MEIA employs over 500 chief imams and, since 2006, over 200 female Muslim spiritual guides (*murshidat*). Each chief imam manages two urban or rural zones covering an average of 70 mosques. Some *murshidat* hold leadership positions in mosques and other societal institutions focused on meeting the needs of other women. Their training is similar to that required of imams;

however, the *murshidat* do not deliver Friday sermons in mosques or lead group prayers. They teach religious subjects, provide counsel on a variety of matters, including women's legal rights and family planning, and manage programs in which men participate.

Political parties founded on religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional bases are prohibited by law. The government permits several parties identified as "Islamically-oriented" rather than Islamist, and some have attracted substantial support, including the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), which is the largest political party in Parliament and heads the current coalition government.

The government does not recognize the JCO, an organization that rejects the king's spiritual authority. The JCO advocates an Islamic state, continues to organize and participate in political demonstrations, and operates Internet sites, although the government does not allow public distribution of its published materials.

The government requires religious groups to register before they are able to undertake financial transactions or conduct other business as private associations and legal entities. Registered churches and associations include the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, and Anglican churches. These churches existed before independence was regained in 1956 and operate within an officially recognized organization, the Conseil des Eglises Chretiennes au Maroc (CECM). AMEP member churches are not part of the CECM. The government permits additional foreign resident churches to form under AMEP auspices.

The government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

The law on associations states that any association that seeks to undermine Islam is invalid.

The government permits the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible are available for sale in selected bookshops, but authorities often confiscate Bibles they believe are intended for proselytizing. The government does not allow the free public distribution of non-Sunni Muslim religious materials.

The government does not require the designation of religion on passports or national identity documents. There are no prohibitions on religious clothing or symbols in either the public or private sphere.

The government gives preferential treatment to Islam of the Maliki School and to Judaism. The government's annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in all public schools and Judaism in some public schools. The government also funds the study of Jewish culture and its artistic, literary, and scientific heritage at some universities. At the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion are taught in the Department of Islamic Studies. Approximately a dozen professors teach Hebrew throughout the country.

The MEIA continues to fund a graduate-level theological course, part of which focuses on Christianity and Judaism, and another course that trains both men and women to be counselors and teachers in mosques. Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, a royally-sponsored university, offers an advanced degree in Islamic studies with an emphasis in comparative religion to MEIA-selected imams and others. The program requires mastery of Greek and Hebrew.

By law all educational institutions must teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki School. These include international schools, such as the French and Spanish schools. Foreign-run schools, however, have the option of not including any religious instruction within the school's curriculum. Private Jewish schools are able to teach Judaism.

The monarchy supports the rehabilitation of synagogues throughout Morocco, an effort it deems necessary to preserve the country's religious and cultural heritage and to serve as a symbol of tolerance.

Government Practices

In September Moroccan Christian Mohammed El Baldi was arrested for proselytizing in Taounate and sentenced to two-and-half years in prison and a fine of 5000 dirhams (\$614). El Baldi appealed his case and was temporarily released from prison. On December 26, an appeals court postponed hearing the case until February 6, 2014.

In May the Rabat Administrative Court issued a verbal ruling in favor of the government's claim of legal authority over the Village of Hope (VOH) orphanage in Ain Leuh on the grounds that a criminal investigation was ongoing. The appellate court's ruling annulled an earlier decision that had upheld the VOH's legal status to file a claim. Members of the VOH board had appealed for the right to appoint a caretaker in September 2012 because the government had not dissolved its association. In 2010, the government expelled the seven foreign resident families (including one U.S. couple) who operated the VOH for proselytizing.

In April the press publicized a High Council of Ulema fatwa that called proselytism a form of "religious terrorism" and recommended the death penalty for Muslims who convert from Islam. Many political parties and civil society organizations quickly denounced that ruling. The fatwa, issued in 2009 but not released until 2013, was deemed merely "advisory" rather than "binding" by the MEIA because the king had not endorsed it.

In July the MEIA closed five quranic schools in Marrakesh for failure to comply with national education regulations for registration. The schools were affiliated with Salafist/Wahhabist cleric Mohammed Maghraoui and his Association for the Quran and Sunna. Some protesters charged that the closures were politically motivated or closed off access to religious education in certain areas. The MEIA also restricted Sunni clerics who expressed views divergent from those of the ministry, including by dismissing at least six imams for the content of their Friday prayers.

Fears of government surveillance and laws restricting public gatherings led most local non-Muslim and non-Jewish groups to refrain from public worship and most met discreetly in their members' homes. Local Christians stated the authorities made phone or house calls several times a year, asserting that the authorities did so to demonstrate that they had lists of members of Christian networks and monitored Christian activities. Some Christian citizens reported that authorities pressured Christian converts to renounce their faith by informing the converts' friends, relatives, and employers of the individuals' conversion. In some cases the family members of a convert asked the authorities to pressure the individual to renounce their new faith.

The government saw the dissent of some citizens who challenged the religious authority of the king, and called for the establishment of a government more deeply rooted in their vision of Islam, as political rather than religious in nature.

Most foreigners attended religious services without restriction at places of worship belonging to officially recognized religious groups. The government did not take active measures to prevent Christian citizens from attending services in the recognized Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant churches. Nevertheless, foreign-resident Christian church officials reported that Moroccan Christians almost never attended their churches and they did not encourage them to do so in order to avoid being accused of proselytizing. There were no reports during the year of expulsions due to charges of proselytism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some local Christians reported the government took no legal measures in response to continued societal scrutiny and harassment. Societal norms and pressure forced many non-Muslims and non-Jewish groups to practice their faiths quietly and discreetly.

Jewish citizens openly practiced their faith and lived in safety throughout the country. Annual Jewish commemorations took place around the country and Jewish visitors regularly visited religious sites. Muslim citizens studied at Christian and Jewish public and private schools. Muslim students constituted the majority at Jewish schools in Casablanca, and a hospital run by the Jewish community provided care to low-income citizens regardless of religion. Members of the Jewish community were represented at high levels in the government, with one Jewish citizen serving as an advisor to the king and another as an ambassador-at-large for the king on Jewish affairs.

Many Muslim citizens characterized the Bahai Faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam and consequently considered Bahais apostates. Most members of the Bahai community avoided disclosing their religious affiliation; however, concerns about their personal safety and property did not prevent their functioning in society, with some holding government jobs.

There was widespread consensus among Muslims in the country regarding religious practices and interpretation.

In February the Catholic Church in Morocco and the EEM officially opened an ecumenical theological institute called the Institut Oecumenique Theologique au Maroc (Al Mowafaqa) in Rabat. The institute offered a university-level diploma in theology accredited by European universities and coursework focused on religious dialogue with Islam. All students were foreign residents or from abroad.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy, consulate general, and visiting U.S. government officials met with senior government and religious officials, including in the MEIA, as well as with Muslim religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, Christian foreign residents, leaders of registered and unregistered Christian groups, and other local religious groups to promote religious freedom. The U.S. government sponsored programs focused on religious tolerance and freedom. During

Ramadan, the embassy organized several events to promote religious dialogue and emphasize religious tolerance. Embassy-funded speakers promoted religious moderation and interfaith dialogue.

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