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October 2001

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and, although Islam is the official state religion, Jewish and Christian communities openly practice their faiths; 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.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, 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. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of approximately 172,320 square miles and its population is approximately 30,122,350. 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 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. There is no information regarding the number of atheists in the country.

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 provides for freedom of religion and Jewish and Christian communities openly practice their faiths; 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. A small foreign Hindu community has received the right to perform cremations and to hold services. Baha'is are forbidden to meet or participate in communal activities. 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 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 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.

In August 2000, the King declared in a nationally televised speech that 100 mosques throughout the country would be used as teaching centers to fight illiteracy. In the first (and pilot) year of the announced program, 10,000 citizens between the ages of 15 and 45 were to receive literacy courses on Islam, civic education,

The Government regularly organizes events and receives foreign religious delegations to encourage tolerance and respect among religions. In July 2000, at the Royal Palace in Tangiers, King Mohamed VI received two Jewish delegations from the Representative Jewish Council of Great Britain and Moroccan Jews residing in the United Kingdom. In September 2000, Royal Counselor Andre Azoulay, a leading Jewish citizen, represented King Mohamed VI at the New York opening of the 2-week exposition sponsored by the palace, entitled "Morocco: Jews and Art in the Muslim world."

Also in July 2000, King Mohamed VI received a delegation from the Boston-based American nongovernmental organization (NGO) Middle East University, which was visiting to open its first summer university program in Morocco. The NGO eventually chose Rabat for its summer site, and opened its program to interested Moroccan university students. Visiting professors and experts from the United States and the Middle East, as well as academics from North African countries, participated in conferences, lectures, and courses during the program.

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.

Islamic law and tradition call for 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 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, in the past the authorities have jailed some converts on the basis of references to Koranic law.

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 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.

[illegible]

have been summoned to the Ministry of the Interior for questioning concerning their faith or for meeting, as had occurred in past years. For the third year in a row, there were no reports of Baha'is being denied passports because of their religion.

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 the country may refer to their embassies or consulates for marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other personal issues if they choose not to adhere to Moroccan law.

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 "Moudouwana"), which is based on the Malikite school of Islamic law. Although the Code of Personal Status was reformed in 1993, women's groups still complain of unequal treatment, particularly under the laws governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance. To marry, a woman generally is required to obtain the permission of her "tuteur," or legal guardian, usually her father. Only in rare circumstances may she act as her own "tuteur." It is far easier for a man to divorce his wife than for a woman to divorce her husband. Under Islamic law and tradition, rather than asking for a divorce, a man simply may repudiate his wife outside of court. Under the 1993 reforms to the Code of Personal Status, a woman's presence in court is required for her husband to divorce her, although women's groups report that this law frequently is ignored. However, human rights activists reported that in one NGO-sponsored test in the late 1990's, officials refused to order a divorce without the wife being present, despite offers of bribes. Nevertheless, women's groups complain that men resort to ruses to evade the new 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 *khola* 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 November 1998, the Minister of Islamic Affairs proposed the institutionalization of 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.

The Government and the King continued to promote their proposal to reform the Personal Status Code to advance women's rights. Islamists and some other traditional segments of society firmly opposed the proposal, especially with respect to its more controversial elements, such as reform of women's legal status in marriage and family law issues.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

After 11 years of house arrest for refusing to acknowledge the religious authority of the King, Islamist dissident Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine was allowed to leave his Sale home in May 2000. Subsequent to the lifting of his house arrest, Sheikh Yassine began receiving at his home leading members of his organization, the JCO, attending mosque prayer services, and speaking before representatives of the national and foreign press corps. Yassine's books, articles, and audiocassettes were sold at some bookstores, and editorials that had called for his release were published without impediment.

On December 10, 2000—International Human Rights Day—security forces around the country arrested hundreds of JCO activists conducting sit-ins in eight of Morocco's largest cities to protest human rights abuses and operational obstacles imposed on their organization by the authorities. Many of those arrested, including multiple members of Sheikh Yassine's immediate family, later were released; however more than 100 were charged, and many of their trials still were ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report. Over half of those charged were prosecuted and sentenced to suspended prison sentences and fines by the end of the period covered by this report. Some of those charged received 1-year prison sentences for participating in an unauthorized demonstration, illegal gathering in public, and possessing dangerous objects. The OMDH also expressed in its May communique its concern about the arrest and trials of the JCO members.

The JCO has an active presence on university campuses and occasionally had organized protests of Yassine's house arrest prior to his release. In November 2000, security forces violently clashed with JCO students at Mohammed VI University (in the Casablanca suburbs) as the JCO prepared for annual student elections. According to news reports, security forces injured more than 100 students and arrested 14. Police claimed that they responded because the students illegally remained on campus overnight and committed acts of vandalism. The students were sentenced to 2 years' imprisonment and fines ranging from \$50 to \$150 (575 to 1,725 dirhams). Other reports indicated that similar although less violent clashes occurred between security forces and JCO students at other university campuses around the country engaged in

student elections.

In November 2000, security forces in Agadir (in the south) forcibly broke up a sit-in demonstration by an Islamist trade union that was striking for better working conditions in a cannery. The violent actions allegedly led to one death, and eight persons were seriously injured.

Prominent members of the JCO are subject to constant surveillance and sometimes are unable to obtain passports and other necessary documents. During the summer of 2000, the Government prevented members of the JCO from gaining access to campgrounds and beaches for group prayer sessions, and arrested and jailed some of the group's members. In August 2000, two JCO members were sentenced to 3 months' imprisonment for their proselytizing activities on a beach in El-Jadida. During the same month, Interior Minister Ahmed Midaoui declared before Parliament that "we are one sole nation and nobody can impose upon others their own vision of Islam," and that "people go to beaches for recreational purposes and we do not have Islamic beaches." He also added that "we cannot tolerate the appearance of sectarianism in our society."

In 2000 the Gendarmerie Royale summoned several members of the foreign Christian community for questioning concerning the practice of their faith. The Gendarmerie began an investigation into their activities at that time. The investigation reportedly still was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report. Despite not possessing a resident visa, the subjects of the investigation continued to face no problem residing in, exiting, and returning to the country.

In the past, the Ministry of Interior claimed that there were 55 Islamists serving sentences for offenses that ranged from arms smuggling in the 1980's to participation in a bomb attack on a hotel in Marrakech in 1994. In the past, there also were claims that some of these Islamists were imprisoned solely for calling for an Islamic state during the 1980's. The 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-1980's, remain in prison. The other 24 members completed their sentences or otherwise were released at various times between 1994 and the end of the year.

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 Government's 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. 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 discouraged by society. 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.

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 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.

In mid-October 2000, two Moroccan youths attempted to vandalize a synagogue in Tangiers following the outbreak of Israeli-Arab violence in the Middle East. King Mohamed VI publicly declared in a televised speech on November 6, 2000 that the government would not tolerate mistreatment of Morocco's Jews. A Tangiers court sentenced the two youths to 1 year in prison.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

During the period covered by this report, U.S. 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.

U.S. 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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