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2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Morocco

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom but, in practice, the government restricted religious freedom in some cases. The government did not demonstrate a trend towards either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The constitution stipulates that Islam is the official state religion; the king is “commander of the believers (amir al-mumineen)” and “defender of the faith (ad-din)” in the country. The government continued to respect the right of the vast majority of citizens to practice their religion, although government policies discouraged conversion from Islam and prohibited efforts to proselytize Muslims. Non-Muslim foreign communities generally practiced their faith openly. The law permits Sunni Maliki Muslims to proselytize others, but it prohibits efforts to proselytize Sunni Maliki Muslims. Some Moroccan Christians reported that harassment by police officers decreased. The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials as well as some Islamic materials that did not follow the Maliki rite of Sunni Islam to which the monarchy adheres. Several small religious minorities practiced their faith with varying degrees of official restrictions. The government monitored the activities of religious groups and placed restrictions on individuals and organizations when it deemed their actions exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice toward some who did not adhere to the Maliki rite of Sunni Islam, mainly involving converts from Islam to other religions. Some Christians reported that societal scrutiny and pressure from family and friends in some cases increased after the 2010 expulsions of foreign Christians. Jews lived in safety throughout the country during the year.

The U.S. ambassador, the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, and other senior administration officials discussed religious freedom, including the expulsions of Christian residents in 2010, with senior government officials and engaged directly with various societal groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country's population is 98.7 percent Muslim, 1.1 percent Christian, and 0.2 percent Jewish. 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 most recent estimates put the size of the Rabat and Marrakesh Jewish communities at about 100 members each. The remainder of the Jewish population is dispersed throughout the country. This population is mostly elderly, with a decreasing number of young persons.

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 reside in the Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas. Various local Christian leaders estimate that there are 4,000 citizen Christians (mostly ethnically Berber) who regularly attend "house" churches and live predominantly in the south. Some local 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.

There are an estimated 3,000 to 8,000 Shia Muslims, most of them foreign residents from Lebanon or Iraq, but also a few citizen converts. Followers of several Sufi Muslim orders across the Maghreb and West Africa undertake joint annual pilgrimages to the country. The Baha'i community, located in urban areas, numbers 350 to 400 persons.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom but, in practice, the government restricts religious freedom in some cases. The constitution stipulates that Islam is the official state religion, and the king is "commander of believers (amir al-mumineen)" and "defender of the faith (ad-din)" in the country.

All citizens, including the members of parliament who are normally immune to arrest, may be prosecuted on charges of expressing opinions alleged to be injurious to Islam. The law permits Sunni Maliki Muslims to proselytize others but prohibits efforts to proselytize Sunni Maliki Muslims. The government tolerates several small religious minorities with varying degrees of restrictions but prohibits the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials. The government monitors activities in mosques and of non-Muslim religious groups and places some restrictions on participants 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 Qur'anic schools to prevent what the ministry deems to be 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 religiously-oriented political groups

but generally tolerate activities limited to the propagation of Islam, education, and charity. The MEIA also tries to control the sale of 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.

Authorities frequently monitor registered foreign resident Christian church services and leadership meetings but do not interfere with their activities. Some foreign resident Christian leaders reported an increase in monitoring since March 2010. While there are no reports indicating systematic discrimination against religious minorities in the provision of public services, some Moroccan Christians have reported harassment by both on- and off-duty police officers. Some Christian citizens have reported that the government, through local police, requires them to confirm and attest on an annual basis that they remain Christian. Often this is done through a telephone call or a home visit by local police, but at other times it involves an interrogation at a local police station. However, there were fewer reports of this practice than in previous years.

According to law, anyone who has impeded or prevented 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 shake 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.

Article 26 of the Law on Entry and Residence of Foreigners in Morocco and Illegal Immigration and Emigration 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. In 2010 the government cited this law in expelling or refusing entry to foreign Christians whom it had accused of proselytizing, but there were no such cases reported during the year.

Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.

There is a separate set of laws and courts with authority over personal status matters for Jews, which cover 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 Sharia (Islamic law) administer the courts for personal status matters for those of all other faiths. However, Christians inherit according to civil law. There are no other legal mechanisms that recognize the country’s Christian community (or other non-Muslims) in the same way the state recognizes its Jewish community. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam before they can adopt children in the country. According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman. However, a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam.

A 2002 law restricting media freedom states that expression deemed critical of “Islam, the institution of the monarchy, or territorial integrity” is not permitted and may be punishable by imprisonment. Satellite, Internet programming, and print media are otherwise fairly unrestricted.

By law only the Supreme Council of Ulemas, a group appointed by the king with representatives from all regions of the country, may issue fatwas. A separate Brussels-based Council of Ulema was established for the more than three million citizens living abroad.

The MEIA employs 581 chief imams and 207 female Muslim spiritual guides (mourchidaat), who provide guidance to women, young girls, and children in mosques, prisons, and charity homes. Each chief imam manages two urban or rural zones, which cover an average of 70 mosques.

Political parties founded on religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional bases are prohibited by law. The government permits several parties identified as “Islamic oriented,” and some have attracted substantial support, including the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), which is the largest political party in the parliament and heads the coalition government.

The government does not recognize al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Charity Organization, or JCO), an organization that rejects the king’s spiritual authority. The JCO advocates for an Islamic state, continues to organize and participate in political demonstrations, and operates Web sites, although the government does not allow the public distribution of its published materials.

The government requires religious groups to register before they can undertake financial transactions or conduct other business as private associations and legal entities. Registered churches and associations include the Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, and Anglican churches. These churches existed before independence and operate within a Council of Churches (which does not have governmental status). The Catholic and French Reformed 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.

In the past the government denied or delayed permanent residency to some non-Muslim foreign clergy who were members of unregistered religious organizations. In recent years church groups sometimes experienced delays in approval of applications for legal status.

A small resident foreign Christian community operates churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools with the government’s authorization.

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.

Most foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions at houses of worship belonging to officially recognized religious institutions. Fears of government surveillance and laws restricting public gatherings led many local non-Muslim and non-Jewish groups to feel constrained not to worship publicly; some meet discreetly in their members’ homes. There are no laws that prohibit Christian citizens from attending services in the recognized Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, and the government did not take active measures to prevent them from doing so. However, expatriate Christian church officials have reported that Moroccan Christians almost never attend their churches and that they do not encourage them to do so, in order to avoid being accused of proselytizing. Article 2 of the public assembly laws 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. There are a limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible available for sale in select bookshops. However, authorities often confiscated Bibles they believed were intended for proselytizing. The government does not allow free public distribution of non-Muslim religious materials.

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

The government gives preferential treatment to Maliki Islam and Judaism. For example, 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. Throughout the country, approximately a dozen professors teach Hebrew.

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.

By law all educational institutes are only allowed to teach Sunni Maliki Islam. These include international schools, such as the French and Spanish schools. However, foreign-run schools also have the option of not including any religious creed within the school's curriculum.

The following Islamic holy days are national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Islamic New Year. Other religious groups observe their holy days without interference from government authorities.

Government Practices

There were no confirmed reports of government abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The government did not demonstrate a trend towards either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

In the April 2010 case of a citizen who filed a complaint against five employees of the George Washington Academy for allegedly converting a former student to Christianity, the five left the country and there were no further developments.

In March 2010 the government expelled at least 33 Christian foreign residents from the country and declared an additional 81 persona non grata for alleged proselytizing. None have returned. Seven of these individuals challenged their expulsions in court; the courts dismissed two cases in 2010, four individuals dropped their cases in 2010, and one individual dropped his case in 2011.

During the year, the Ministry of Interior continued to monitor suspected proselytizing activities, especially those of Shia Muslims and Christians. Some Christian citizens alleged that authorities sought to contribute to societal prejudice and to entice Christian converts to renounce their faith by informing the converts' friends, relatives, and employers of the individuals' conversion.

The government reserved the right to enforce legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom and, during the year, did so on occasion.

The government continued to confiscate Bibles, Shia tracts, and other literature that did not adhere to the Maliki rite of Sunni Islam. Authorities said that they did so when they suspected that such literature was used for purposes of proselytizing. Bibles and many other types of religious literature were available for private purchase from bookstores and in libraries throughout the country.

Members of the Berber community and other citizens, including members of non-Muslim religious communities, complained that some regional authorities sought to prevent them from registering children's names that were deemed "non-Muslim," based on a law that had been overturned in 2002. Most applicants reportedly received permission to register the name of their choice, but sometimes only after a lengthy bureaucratic appeal process. In 2008, the minister of interior publically reemphasized that there was no official restriction on names.

On request the government provides special protection to Jewish community members, visitors, and institutions, as well as to the foreign resident Christian community. Annual Jewish commemorations take place around the country, and Jewish visitors regularly visit religious sites. Members of the country's Jewish community have some representation 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.

Some vendors at the annual government-sponsored book fair in Casablanca in February offered publications that were anti-Semitic. There was no indication that the government promoted these works.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The government worked to counter extremist ideology in the name of religion and continued to encourage tolerance, respect, and dialogue among religious groups that complied with its antiproselytizing laws.

The government continued the training of mouchidaat, a program begun in 2006, in part to promote tolerance and to increase women's spiritual participation. The government stated that their training is exactly the same as that required of male imams. However, the mouchidaat do not deliver Friday sermons in mosques or lead group prayers; they focus much of their work on meeting various needs of other women. Since the inception of the program, more than 200 women have been trained and appointed to leadership positions in mosques and other societal institutions. They teach religious subjects, provide counsel on a variety of subjects, including women's legal rights and family planning, and manage programs in which men participate.

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 increased societal scrutiny and harassment since the 2010 expulsions of Christian missionaries, but no perpetrators were arrested. Societal norms and pressure constrain 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 during the year. 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.

Many Muslim citizens view the Baha'i faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam and consequently consider Bahai's apostates. Most members of the Baha'i community avoid disclosing their religious affiliation; however, concerns about their personal safety and property do not prevent their functioning in society, and some hold government jobs.

There is widespread consensus among Muslims in the country regarding religious practices and interpretation. However, some dissenters challenged the religious authority of the king and called for the establishment of a government more deeply rooted in their vision of Islam. The government views such dissent as political rather than religious in nature, since critiques relate largely to the exercise of power.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy and senior State Department officials raised religious freedom issues with the government. During a visit by the ambassador at large for international religious freedom and the annual bilateral human rights dialogue, the embassy renewed exchanges on religious freedom issues with the government.

U.S. government officials met with religious officials, including in the MEIA, and with other senior ministry officials, as well as with Muslim religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, Christian foreign residents, the leaders of the registered and unregistered Christian communities, and other local religious groups, including Muslim minorities, to promote religious freedom. Through the annual bilateral human rights dialogue, launched in 2007, U.S. officials engaged counterparts from three ministries in constructive and open discussions on the entire range of human rights issues, including religious freedom. The U.S. government sponsored programs focusing on religious tolerance and freedom using the United States as a model. For example, during Ramadan, the U.S. embassy organized several events to promote religious dialogue and emphasize religious tolerance.
