

# MOROCCO 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country to be a sovereign Muslim state and Islam to be the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly and the free exercise of belief to everyone. The constitution states the king is the protector of Islam and the guarantor of freedom of worship. It prohibits political parties, parliamentarians, and constitutional amendments from infringing upon Islam. The criminal code prohibits the use of “enticements” by non-Muslims to try to convert Muslims to another religion. According to human rights organizations and local Christian leaders, the government occasionally detained and questioned Moroccan Christians about their beliefs and contacts with other Christians. The authorities arrested and sentenced several individuals for eating and smoking in public during Ramadan. In May police arrested Shia leader Abdou El Chakrani for alleged financial improprieties. Shia leaders said Chakrani was targeted for his religious beliefs and his attempt to register an association affiliated with known Shia leaders. Some local Christians reported authorities pressured Moroccan Christian converts to renounce their faith. Although the law allows the registration of religious groups, some religious minority groups continued to report government rejection of their registration requests. Some religious minority groups, such as the Bahai community, practiced their religion without formal registration. Fear of government harassment and reported societal, familial, and cultural pressure led some local Christians, Bahais, and Shia to refrain from public worship and instead meet discreetly in members’ homes. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) continued to guide and monitor the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by the broadcast media, actions it said were intended to combat violent extremism. The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. The king sponsored an international conference aimed at affirming the importance of protecting non-Muslims in Muslim majority countries. He instructed the minister of education and the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs to modify religious education textbooks to promote moderation and tolerance.

Citizens were reportedly attacked during Ramadan for smoking during fasting hours. A local Christian posted an online video about the presence of Moroccan Christians in the country, which sparked debate. In June the government issued a warning to the private Aswat radio station for a December broadcast that included

anti-Semitic rhetoric. In June protestors gathered in front of parliament to demand the repeal of an article of the penal code, which set jail time and fines for breaking the fast in public during Ramadan.

The U.S. Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officers, and other U.S. government officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance through visits with key government officials. They highlighted the importance of protection of religious minorities, and interfaith dialogue with government officials, including during the visits of the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the U.S. Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 33.7 million (July 2016) and estimates more than 99 percent of the population 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. The Rabat and Marrakech Jewish communities each have approximately 75 members.

Moroccan and foreign-resident Christian leaders estimate there are between 2,000 to 6,000 Moroccan Christians distributed throughout the country, although some leaders state there may be as many as 50,000.

Foreign-resident Christian leaders estimate the foreign-resident Christian population numbers at least 30,000 Roman Catholics and 10,000 Protestants. The foreign-resident Protestant community includes the French Evangelical Church of Morocco (EEM), the Moroccan Association of Protestant Churches (AMEP), and Anglican Churches in Casablanca and Tangier. There is a small foreign-resident Russian Orthodox community in Rabat and a small foreign-resident Greek Orthodox community in Casablanca. Most foreign-resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas, but small numbers of foreign Christians are present throughout the country. Many foreign-resident Christians are migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.

Shia Muslim leaders estimate there are tens of thousands of Shia, with the largest numbers in the north. In addition, there is an estimated 1,000-2,000 foreign-resident Shia from Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Leaders of the Ahmadiyya Muslim

Community estimate their numbers at 600 members. There are 350-400 Bahais throughout the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, the country is a sovereign Muslim state and Islam is the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, and says the state “guarantees to all the free exercise of beliefs.” The constitution states the king holds the Islamic title of commander of the faithful, is the protector of Islam, and is the guarantor of freedom of worship in the country. The constitution prohibits the enactment of laws or constitutional amendments infringing upon its provisions relating to Islam.

The criminal code prohibits attempts by non-Muslims to “shake the faith” of citizens from Sunni Islam and punishes anyone who “employs enticements” to undermine the faith of a Muslim or to convert a Muslim to another religion with six months to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$49). 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 constitution and the law governing the media sector prohibit any citizen, including members of parliament normally immune from arrest, from criticizing Islam in public platforms, such as print or online media, or public speeches. Such expressions are punishable by imprisonment for two years and a fine of 200,000 dirhams (\$19,700).

Sunni Muslims and Jews are the only religious groups recognized in the constitution as native to Morocco. The law does not require religious groups to register to worship privately. The law requires all religious groups to be registered as an association in order to conduct business on behalf of the group or to hold public gatherings.

Associations must register with local Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials in the jurisdiction of the association’s headquarters in order to conduct financial transactions, hold bank accounts, rent property, and address the government in the name of the group. Religious institutions that focus solely on foreign-resident populations may register as a branch of an international association. An individual representative of a religious group not registered as an association may be held

liable for any of the group's public gatherings, transactions, bank accounts, property rentals, and/or petitions to the government. The registration application must contain the name and purpose of the association; the name, nationality, age, profession, residence of its founders; and the address of the association's headquarters. The constitution guarantees civil society associations and nongovernmental organizations the right to organize themselves and exercise their activities freely within the scope of the constitution. The law on associations prohibits organizations which pursue activities the government regards as "illegal, contrary to good morals, or aimed at undermining the Islamic religion, the integrity of the national territory, or the monarchical regime, or which call for discrimination."

Foreign-resident Christian Churches are registered as associations. Registered foreign-resident churches include the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican Churches, which maintain different forms of official status. The Russian Orthodox and Anglican Churches are registered as branches of international associations through the Russian and United Kingdom embassies, respectively. The Protestant and Catholic Churches, whose existence as foreign-resident churches predates the country's independence in 1956, maintain a special status recognized by the government since independence.

Legal provisions outlined in the general tax code provide tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of recognized religious groups (Sunni Muslims and Jews) and religious groups registered as associations.

By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion is punishable by six months to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$49).

The penal code states any person known to be Muslim who breaks the fast in public during the month of Ramadan without an exception granted by religious authorities is liable for punishment of six months in prison and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$49).

The High Authority for Audiovisual Communications established by the constitution requires all eight television stations to dedicate 5 percent of their airtime to Islamic religious content. It requires all public channels to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer five times daily.

By law, all educational institutions must teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki-Ashari school. The government's annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in all public schools.

Foreign-run schools, such as the American, French, and Spanish schools, have the choice of teaching Sunni Islam or of not including any religious instruction within the school's curriculum. Private Jewish schools are able to teach Judaism.

According to the constitution, only the High Council of Ulema, a group headed and appointed by the king with representatives from all regions of the country, is authorized to issue fatwas, which become binding only through endorsement by the king in a royal decree.

A separate set of laws and special courts govern personal status matters for Jews, including functions such as marriage, inheritance, and other personal status matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Muslim judges trained in the country's Maliki-Ashari Sunni interpretation of sharia administer the courts for personal status matters for all other religious groups.

According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman; a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam.

Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam and be permanent residents before they can become guardians of abandoned or orphaned children. Guardianship entails the caretaking of a child, which may last until the child reaches 18, but does not allow changing the child's name or inheritance, and requires the child's religion not be changed, according to orphanage directors.

According to the constitution, political parties may not be based on religion and may not seek to attack or denigrate Islam as one of their objectives.

The law permits the government to expel summarily any noncitizen resident it determines to be "a threat to public order," even where other laws require due process first.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

The government reportedly arrested, detained, and questioned local Christians about their beliefs. The authorities arrested and sentenced several individuals for eating and smoking in public during Ramadan. In May police arrested Shia leader Abdou El Chakrani for alleged financial improprieties, although Shia leaders said Chakrani was targeted for his religious beliefs and his attempt to register an association affiliated with known Shia leaders. Some local Christians reported authorities pressured converts to renounce their faith. The government monitored, and in some cases restricted, religious activities of Muslims and non-Muslims. It continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam.

According to the National Federation of Amazigh Associations, an Amazigh (Berber) rights group, police officers from the Royal Gendarmerie arrested a local Christian on March 6 in Guelmim and a second on March 10 in Sale. The group stated the two were detained and interrogated about their beliefs. The individual in Guelmim stated he was held for five hours, and the individual in Sale stated police took him off a bus, announced his religion to the passengers on the bus, and then detained him for eight hours. During his detention, he said the police accused him of apostasy and said they would reconvert him to Islam. The two individuals submitted a complaint to the minister of justice on March 18; but as of the end of the year, the authorities had not opened an investigation.

The media reported authorities arrested two men in Zagora for drinking water in public during fasting hours in June. The men were sentenced to a two-month suspended jail sentence and a fine of 500 dirhams (\$49). The media also reported during Ramadan at least three people were arrested in Rabat for smoking cigarettes in public.

In May police arrested Shia leader Abdou El Chakrani for financial improprieties at his place of work, but Shia leaders said Chakrani was targeted for his religious beliefs and his attempt to register an association affiliated with known Shia leaders. In April Chakrani tried to register an association in the city of Tetouan called Progressive Messengers, but his application was rejected. A spokesperson for the group said that the creation of the association would be a test of the authorities' willingness to respect the constitution. The goal of the association was to defend the rights of religious minorities and to support religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, as well as religious freedom.

Some local Christians reported authorities pressured Christian converts to renounce their faith by informing the converts' friends, relatives, and employers of the individuals' conversion.

The MEIA remained the principal government institution responsible for shaping the country's religious sphere and promoting its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The MEIA continued to provide government-required training and direction to imams and to shape the content of Friday mosque sermons by providing approved topics. It also monitored Quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considered to be inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure teaching followed approved doctrine. The government continued to require mosques to close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for what it termed unauthorized activity, such as gatherings intended to promote extremism. There continued to be no known Shia mosques.

The MEIA continued to employ more than 500 chief imams and more than 200 female Muslim spiritual guides (*murshidat*) in mosques or religious institutions throughout the country. The female guides taught religious subjects and provided counsel on a variety of matters, including women's legal rights and family planning.

The government continued to allow the operation of registered foreign-resident churches, but continued to refuse requests by local Shia groups to register, which religious leaders and legal scholars said prevented those groups from legally gathering for religious ceremonies in public or forming associations under which they could operate legally. Local Christian and Bahai groups continued to report they had not attempted to register with authorities, believing their registration requests would be denied. Nonregistered religious groups received varying treatment by authorities. Some noted they had been able to practice their religion while others reported authorities shut down their gatherings or prevented them from occurring. A number of religious groups reported they continued cooperating with authorities and occasionally informed them of planned large gatherings, for which authorities sometimes provided security.

Local Christians and Shia Muslims continued to state fears of government harassment were part of the reason they refrained from public worship and instead met discreetly in members' homes. Foreign-resident Christian church officials reported local Christians rarely attended their churches, and the officials did not encourage them to do so as to avoid accusations of proselytizing. Local Christians stated the authorities made phone or house calls several times a year to

demonstrate they had lists of members of Christian networks and monitored Christian activities. Foreigners attended religious services without restriction at places of worship belonging to officially recognized Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Churches.

In December the media reported local authorities in Casablanca prevented a group of local Christians from obtaining legal permission to hold a public religious gathering for Christmas. Authorities reportedly rejected the group's request to gather by saying that only registered associations could legally obtain such permission. The group then tried to obtain permission by submitting a general proposal to authorities, which did not include their plans for religious practice, but the application was rejected when authorities discovered there were Christian religious elements to the group's plans.

The king in February instructed the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs and the minister of education to review and rewrite religious textbooks and religious curricula used in public and private schools, with the stated goal of removing any extremist or intolerant references and promoting moderation, tolerance, and coexistence.

The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. Its policy remained to control the sale of all books, videotapes, and DVDs it considered extremist.

The government continued to permit the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible were available for sale in a few bookshops for use in university religion courses. Authorities confiscated Bibles they believed were intended for use in proselytizing.

The construction of new mosques, including those constructed using private funds, continued to require authorization from the MEIA. The authorization of the MOI continued to be a requirement for the renovation or construction of churches.

In September local officials in Marrakech rejected the application for candidacy of a Salafist figure running for parliament, stating his past anti-Semitic statements against the Jewish community disqualified him as a candidate for office.

Jews and local Christians stated elementary and high school curricula still did not include mention of the historical legacy and current presence of their groups in the country.

The government continued to disseminate information about Islam over dedicated state-funded Quranic television and radio channels. The television channel Assadissa (Sixth) programming was strictly religious, consisting primarily of Quran and *hadith* (authoritative sayings and deeds ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad) readings and exegesis, highlighting the government's interpretation of Islam.

Although the government continued to ban the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), an Islamist social movement, because of its longstanding rejection of the preeminence of the king's spiritual authority, the government reportedly tolerated some of its activities while suppressing others. The JCO continued to be able to participate in political demonstrations, hold small conferences, release press statements, and manage internet sites, although the government occasionally prevented the organization from meeting and restricted public distribution of the JCO's published materials. Because religion and politics are closely linked, it is difficult to categorize these restrictions as being solely based on religious identity.

According to observers, the government tolerated social and charitable activities consistent with its view of Sunni Islam. For example, the Unity and Reform Movement, which shares some leadership with the ruling Party of Justice and Development, and is the country's largest registered Islamist social organization, continued to operate without restrictions according to media reports.

The monarchy continued to support the restoration of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries throughout the country, efforts it stated it deemed necessary to preserve the country's religious and cultural heritage and to serve as a symbol of tolerance.

The government continued to fund the study of Jewish culture and heritage at universities. At the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion were course offerings in the Department of Islamic Studies.

In June the king inaugurated a new royal institute in Fes, the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Islamic Scholars, with the stated aim of promoting religious tolerance and coexistence. The establishment of the foundation brought together 120 Muslim scholars recognized for their knowledge of Islamic law and theology from 31 countries in Africa.

The government hosted the Marrakech Declaration conference in January, which brought together religious scholars and government representatives from across the Islamic world. Under discussion was a statement rooted in Islamic texts on the need to protect religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries. Subsequent to the conference, a number of participants, including the government, publicly stated their support for the declaration.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In June during Ramadan, a group of young men attacked a man in Marrakech and another group attacked a man in Rabat for smoking cigarettes during public fasting hours.

In June a woman posted a video online in which she identified herself as a practicing Christian and explained that, despite not sharing the Muslim faith of her fellow citizens, she was no less Moroccan. The video sparked an online and media debate on the status of local Christians. Many praised the video and media outlets noted it was not an attempt at proselytization, while many online reactions were negative, with commenters calling for the woman to leave the country.

On June 25, protestors gathered in front of parliament to demand the repeal of an article of the penal code, which sets jail time and fines for breaking the fast in public during Ramadan.

Local Christians reported pressure to convert to Islam or renounce their Christian faith from non-Christian family and friends. Local Christian leaders said young Christians who still lived with their Muslim families did not reveal their faith to them because they believed they might be expelled from their homes unless they renounced Christianity. They also reported the government did not respond to complaints about frequent societal harassment.

Members of nonrecognized religious minorities said fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families, social ridicule, employment discrimination, and potential violence against them by "extremists" were the main reason for continuing to practice their faiths discreetly. Members of the Bahai Faith said they were open about their faith with family, friends, and neighbors, but feared extremist elements in society would try to do them harm, leading them to ask local police for protection at their gatherings. Shia Muslims said in some areas, particularly in large cities in the north, they did not hide their faith from

family, friends, or neighbors, but many continued to avoid disclosing their religious affiliation in areas where their numbers were smaller.

The media continued to report women had difficulties in finding employment in the private sector, or with the army or police, if they wore a hijab. When they did obtain employment in those sectors, the women reported employers either encouraged or required them to remove their headscarves during working hours.

In June the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication issued a warning to the private Aswat radio station for a December broadcast that included anti-Semitic content. During the program, the radio anchor reportedly asked listeners: “Who are the people most hostile to Muslims?” which elicited several unfavorable responses about Jews and Christians. The radio host agreed with the statements made about Jews.

Jewish citizens said they continued to live and attend services at synagogues in safety. They said they continued to visit religious sites regularly and to hold annual commemorations.

Christian leaders estimated that out of the total number of local Christians, there were 1,000 to 3,000 who regularly attended “house” churches.

Muslim citizens continued to study at private Christian and private Jewish schools, in part because these schools maintained the reputation of superior education. According to school administrators, Muslim students constituted a significant portion of the students at Jewish schools in Casablanca.

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

The U.S. Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officers, and visiting U.S. government officials met with senior government officials, including the minister of interior and the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs, to promote religious freedom and tolerance of religion. In January embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials, including the U.S. Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia, participated in the Marrakech Declaration conference on the rights of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries and met with senior government officials to underscore U.S. support for tolerance of religious minority communities. In February the visiting U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with members of religious minority groups and senior government officials to discuss the state of

religious freedom in the country and encourage the government to take steps to protect religious minorities and encourage their acceptance in society. In May the visiting U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with Jewish groups and government officials and commended the country's protection of its Jewish community and encouraged them to share their expertise in combatting anti-Semitism with other Arab countries.

The Ambassador and embassy officers met with Muslim religious scholars to discuss religious tolerance, and with leaders of the Jewish community, Christian foreign residents, and leaders of registered and unregistered Christian, Shia, and Bahai groups, as well as other local religious groups, to discuss issues facing the various groups. The Ambassador spoke at a conference focused on the Moroccan Jewish diaspora's role in the country and reaffirmed U.S. support for religious diversity and tolerance. The embassy fostered programs designed to highlight religious tolerance and counter violent extremism.