

# **WESTERN SAHARA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

Moroccan laws and policies regarding religion and religious organizations apply in the approximately 85 percent of the Western Sahara administered by Morocco. The Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO), a Sahrawi independence movement based in Algeria, administers the part of the territory not under Moroccan administration. According to the Moroccan constitution, Islam is the religion of the state, and the state guarantees freedom of thought, expression, assembly, and the free exercise of beliefs. Moroccan law penalizes the use of enticements to convert a Muslim to another religion, prohibits criticism of Islam, and prohibits political parties from infringing upon Islam. There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom in either the territory administered by Morocco or the territory administered by the POLISARIO.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance issues with Moroccan officials.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 587,000 (July 2016 estimate). The overwhelming majority of the population is Sunni Muslim. Christian leaders report there are dozens of Moroccan Christians, as well as a small group of foreign resident Roman Catholics.

There is a small foreign community, many of whose members are non-Muslim, working for the United Nations Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

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

### **Legal Framework**

Morocco maintains administrative control of approximately 85 percent of the territory. In the area administered by Morocco, the constitution and laws of

Morocco apply. The POLISARIO administers the part of the territory not under Moroccan administration.

The Moroccan constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the state, but the state “guarantees to all the free exercise of beliefs.” The constitution guarantees the freedom of thought, expression, and assembly.

Moroccan law penalizes anyone who “employs enticements to undermine the faith of a Muslim” or to convert a Muslim to another religion with up to three years in prison plus fines of up to 500 dirhams (\$49). It similarly punishes anyone who impedes or prevents one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion. The law prohibits anyone from criticizing Islam and requires all educational institutions to teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki-Ashari school. Other Moroccan law pertaining to the registration of religious groups, their operations, and the application of sharia or civil law also applies.

The Moroccan constitution states the king holds the Islamic title of Commander of the Faithful, Protector of Islam, and is the guarantor of freedom to practice one’s religion. It also states the king must approve all fatwas. According to the constitution, political parties may not be based on religion and may not seek “infringement” of Islam as one of their objectives.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom in either the territory administered by Morocco or the territory administered by the POLISARIO.

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

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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

U.S. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance issues with Moroccan officials.