

# **WESTERN SAHARA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The Kingdom of Morocco claims the territory of Western Sahara and administers the area it controls by the same constitution, laws, and structures as in internationally recognized Morocco, including laws that deal with religious freedom. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO), an organization seeking the territory's independence, disputes Morocco's claim to sovereignty over the territory. According to the Moroccan constitution, Islam is the religion of the state, and the state guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly. The constitution also says the state guarantees to everyone the freedom to "practice his religious affairs." The constitution states the king holds the Islamic title "Commander of the Faithful," and that he is the protector of Islam and guarantor of the freedom to practice religious affairs in the country. It also prohibits political parties from being founded on religion and forbids political parties, parliamentarians, and constitutional amendments from denigrating or infringing on Islam. Moroccan law penalizes the use of enticements to convert a Muslim to another religion and prohibits criticism of Islam. There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom in the portion of the territory administered by Morocco.

Representatives of Christian minority groups said fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families and social ridicule, were the main reasons leading them to practice their faith discreetly.

U.S. officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance with Moroccan officials and also met members of religious minority communities during visits to the territory.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 636,000 (midyear 2019 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 the Referendum in Western Sahara.

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

### **Legal Framework**

Morocco administers the territory it controls in Western Sahara by the same constitution, laws, and structures that apply within internationally recognized Morocco.

The Moroccan constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees the freedoms of thought, expression, and assembly and says the state guarantees to everyone the freedom to practice their religious affairs.

The Moroccan constitution and the law governing media prohibit any individual from criticizing Islam on public platforms, such as in print or online media, or in public speeches. Such expressions are punishable by imprisonment for two years and a fine of 200,000 dirhams (\$20,800).

Moroccan law penalizes anyone who “employs enticements to undermine the faith” or convert a Muslim to another faith, and provides punishments of six months to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$21-\$52). 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’ imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$21-\$52). By law, all publicly funded educational institutions are required to teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. Other Moroccan laws pertaining to the registration of religious groups, their operations, and the application of relevant aspects of personal status law also apply.

The Moroccan constitution states the king holds the Islamic title of “Commander of the Faithful,” and that he is the protector of Islam and guarantor of the freedom to practice religious affairs. It also states only the High Council of Ulema, a group headed and appointed by the king, is authorized to issue fatwas, which become legally binding only through endorsement by the king in a royal decree and subsequent confirmation by parliamentary legislation. According to the constitution, political parties may not be founded on religion and may not denigrate or infringe on Islam.

### **Government Practices**

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

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

Representatives of Christian minority groups said fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families and social ridicule, were the main reasons leading them to practice their faith discreetly.

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

U.S. officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance with Moroccan officials and also met members of religious minority communities during their visits to the territory.