



## Morocco

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Islam is the official state religion, and the King is "Commander of the Faithful and the Supreme Representative of the Muslim Community." Non-Muslim foreign communities openly practice their faiths.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. The Government places certain restrictions on non-Islamic religious materials and proselytizing. Several small religious minorities are tolerated with varying degrees of official restrictions. The Government monitors the activities of mosques and places some restrictions on Muslims and Islamic organizations whose activities are thought to have exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious practice and become political in nature.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination toward those with different religious beliefs, and converts from Islam to other religions.

The U.S. Government regularly discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2004 census, the country has an area of 172,320 square miles and a population of 34 million, of which 99 percent are Muslim, and 1 percent are Christian.

According to the country's Jewish community leaders, there are an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 Jews, the majority of whom reside in Casablanca and are the remnants of a much larger community that has mostly emigrated. The estimated size of the Rabat Jewish community is 150 to 200. The remainder of the Jewish population is dispersed throughout the country. The population is mostly elderly, with a diminishing number of young people.

The expatriate Christian community, Catholic and Protestant, consists of approximately 5,000 practicing members, although some estimates are as high as 25,000. Most Christians reside in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas.

The Baha'i community, also located in urban areas, numbers 350 to 400 persons. The Government recognizes the presence of a Shi'a Muslim community, estimated at 3,000 members.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Islam is the official state religion, and the King is "Commander of the Faithful and the Supreme Representative of the Muslim Community" with the responsibility of ensuring "respect for Islam." The Government prohibits the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials, bans all proselytizing, and tolerates several small religious minorities with varying degrees of 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 acceptable religious

practice and become political in nature.

According to Article 220 of the Penal Code, any attempt to stop one or more persons from the exercise of their religious beliefs or from attendance at religious services is unlawful and may be punished by 3 to 6 months' imprisonment and a fine of \$16 to \$79 (115 to 575 dirhams). The article applies the same penalty to "anyone who employs incitements to shake the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion." Any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert is illegal. Foreign missionaries either limit their proselytizing to non-Muslims or attempt to conduct their work discreetly.

The Government cites the Penal Code's prohibition on proselytism in most cases in which courts ruled to expel foreign missionaries. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.

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.

Jewish and many Christian communities openly practice their faiths. A small foreign Hindu community may freely perform cremations and hold services.

The Government requires religious groups to register in order to undertake financial transactions and other business as private associations and legal entities. Registered churches and associations include the Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, English Protestant, and Anglican Churches. During the reporting period, the Government did not license or approve new religions or religious organizations.

The Government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of the major religious groups, namely Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

The Government's annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in many 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 the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion are taught in the Department of Islamic Studies. Throughout the country, approximately 13 professors teach Hebrew. The country is the only Arab nation with a Jewish museum.

In 2008 the National Library signed an agreement to share its relevant archives with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; additional statements from government officials and the National Library director stressed the importance that the country accords to its Jewish minority.

The Government continues to encourage tolerance, respect, and dialogue among religious groups. During the reporting period, senior government officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (MIAE), received delegations of U.S. Christian and Jewish leaders. Morocco participates in the Alliance of Civilizations and other international groups that promote religious tolerance.

The MIAE continues to fund a graduate-level theological course, part of which focuses on Christianity and Judaism, and another that trains both men and women to be counselors and teachers in mosques.

During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the King hosts an annual colloquium of Muslim religious scholars from around the world, including the United States, that considers ways to promote moderate and peaceful religious interpretations and encourages tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and between other religions.

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

## Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The MIAE monitors or provides guidance on Friday mosque sermons and the Qur'anic schools to ensure the teaching of approved doctrine. At times the authorities suppress the activities of religious oriented political groups but generally tolerate activities limited to the propagation of Islam, education, and charity. The Government requires that mosques close to the public shortly after Friday services to prevent use of the premises for unauthorized political activity, and mosques comply. Only the Government can authorize the construction of new mosques, although most mosques are constructed using private funds. There are occasional credible reports of unauthorized or informal mosques.

The MIAE controls and monitors the activities of mosques, places restrictions on activities deemed to have exceeded the bounds of religious practice or become political in nature, and provides religious training for imams. Authorities stated that these measures have eliminated the exploitation of mosques for political propaganda, such as distributing pamphlets and raising funds for illicit organizations.

The Government does not recognize Adl wa Ihsane, the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), an organization that rejects the King's spiritual authority. The JCO advocates 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 continued to prohibit its public meetings throughout the reporting period, referring to the organization as one using religion for political purposes.

Ongoing struggles between the Government and the JCO continued during the reporting period. In March 2007 four JCO members were sentenced to 1 year in prison for participating in illegal gatherings. JCO sources reported that members were regularly harassed.

On February 23, 2008, the media reported the arrest of 53 members of the JCO in Essaouira for holding an unauthorized meeting at the house of a regional leader. The meeting was attended by the movement's regional leaders from Marrakech, Casablanca, Mohammedia, and Essaouira.

Government informers continue to monitor campus activities, primarily those conducted by Islamists.

In March 2008 the media reported the arrest of two French tourists who were in possession of Bibles and compact discs on suspicion of proselytizing in Zagora. They were later allowed to leave the country.

Some non-Muslim religious clergy who are members of unregistered religious organizations have experienced long delays or denial in the receipt of permanent residence.

Foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals. Many citizens of all religions believe that the country is enriched by its centuries-old Jewish minority, and Jews lived in safety throughout the country during the reporting period. On request, the Government provides special protection to Jewish community members, visitors, and institutions. Annual Jewish commemorations take place around the country, and Jewish pilgrims regularly visit holy sites.

A small foreign Christian community operates churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without government restriction. Missionaries who refrain from proselytizing and conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations are largely left unhindered; however, those whose religious activities become public face expulsion.

The Government permits the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. It generally confiscates Arabic-language Bibles and refuses licenses for their importation and sale despite the absence of any law banning such books.

There are two sets of laws and courts with authority over marriage, inheritance, and family matters--one for Muslims and another for Jews. The family law courts are administered, depending on the law that applies, by Muslim and rabbinical authorities who are court officials. Parliament is responsible for any changes to these

laws. The judges who preside over Islamic family law courts are trained in Shari'a (Islamic law) as it is applied in the country.

Rabbinical authorities administer Jewish family courts. Personal status matters are applicable to all non-Muslim citizens. Christians inherit according to the civil law. Jews inherit according to Jewish religious law with government agreement.

The Ministry of Interior continued to monitor proselytizing, especially in the Atlas Mountains, the Souss area, and major cities. According to media reports, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments expressed concern about missionary activity in some remote areas. Also according to the media, the MIAE reported that more than 3,000 persons converted to Christianity in 2007, although actual numbers are difficult to verify.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees [in the country](#).

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including that of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government monitors and works to counter extremism in the name of religion by promoting religious tolerance.

Muslim citizens study at Christian and Jewish schools. Muslim students constitute the majority at a Jewish school in Casablanca, and a hospital run by the Jewish community provides care to low-income citizens regardless of religion.

Several interfaith associations were formed and held conferences in and around the country throughout the reporting period. In February 2008 a Judeo-Rifian association was founded to promote religious understanding and combat terrorism and intolerance.

The MIAE continued reforms launched in 2004 to counter extremist ideology and promote religious moderation and tolerance. It supervises revisions to the country's religious curriculum and broke with precedent by training and appointing women as spiritual guides to mosques across the country. Since the inception of the program, more than 200 women have been trained and appointed to religious leadership positions. Additionally, the Ministry's closed-circuit television network broadcasts approved religious messages and sermons to 2,000 mosques daily. On February 10, 2008, a government-owned television channel dedicated its monthly program "[Fi Dilal Al Islam](#)" ("In the shadow of Islam") to the dialogue between Islam and other religions.

During the reporting period, the MIAE continued to revise national school curricula to remove passages and lessons that misinterpret Qur'anic passages in ways that incite hatred, or disrespect women, other cultures, and different religions.

The 14th annual "Fez Festival of Sacred Music," which included musicians from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and other spiritual traditions, was held June 6-14, 2008.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination toward those with different religious beliefs, and converts from Islam to other religions. In January 2008 sources in the Christian community reported that several citizens were harassed by local police when they attempted to attend a funeral at a Christian church in Casablanca.

Free expression in religious matters is tolerated; however, society discourages public efforts to proselytize. Many Muslims view the Baha'i faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam and consequently consider Baha'is as 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.

Members of the Berber community and other citizens, including some members of non-Muslim religious communities, complained of difficulty in registering children's names that were deemed "non-Muslim" by authorities. Most received permission, but only after a lengthy bureaucratic appeal process that sometimes lasted 2 years. After much discussion in the press, the Minister of Interior stated there was officially no restriction on names, but registration of nontraditional names remained potentially difficult in practice.

There is widespread consensus among Muslims regarding religious practices and interpretation. However, some dissenters challenge the religious authority of the King and call 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. Government regularly discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials encountered no interference from the Government in making contacts with members of any religious group.

U.S. government officials met regularly with religious officials, including the MIAE and other senior ministry officials, Islamic religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, Christian missionaries, the leaders of the registered Christian communities, and other local religious groups, including Muslim minorities. The U.S. Government sponsored programs focusing on religious tolerance and freedom using the U.S. model.

U.S. government officials also met regularly with members of religious communities to promote tolerance and freedom. Officials actively promoted and facilitated meetings between the MIAE and visiting U.S. religious leaders.

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