

WESTERN SAHARA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Moroccan laws and policies regarding religious organizations and religious freedom applied in the approximately 85 percent of the Western Sahara that Morocco administers.

The Moroccan constitution stipulates that “Morocco is a sovereign Muslim state, Islam is the religion of the state,” and prohibits political parties from infringing upon Islam. The constitution also guarantees freedom of thought and religious practice. There were no known places of worship for Bahai or Shia citizens. The government allowed Jewish and foreign Christian communities in Morocco and Western Sahara to attend worship services in approved places. Christian citizens in Western Sahara generally do not attend these services. The government discouraged conversion from Islam, and the law criminalizes attempts by non-Muslims to “shake the faith” of Moroccans from the Maliki-Ashari school of Islam, which the government has interpreted as prohibiting attempts to convert Muslims to other religions. There were no reports of significant Moroccan government actions affecting religious freedom in Western Sahara.

The Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO), a Sahrawi independence movement based in Algeria, administered the part of the territory not under Moroccan administration. There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedoms in either the territory administered by Morocco or that administered by the POLISARIO.

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

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom in the territory with the quasi-governmental Moroccan National Council for Human Rights during official meetings and visits.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 555,000 (July 2014 estimate). The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim. Islamic practice is frequently characterized by *maraboutism*, the veneration of religious figures and

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the tombs in which they are believed to be interred. There is a small group of Roman Catholics.

There is a small foreign community working for the United Nations Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Many of its members are non-Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Due to continuing Moroccan administrative control of approximately 85 percent of the territory, laws and restrictions regarding religious organizations and religious freedom for this territory are the same as those in Morocco. The POLISARIO administers the remaining territory.

The Moroccan constitution stipulates that Morocco is a sovereign Muslim state, Islam is the religion of the state, and prohibits political parties from infringing upon Islam. The constitution also guarantees the freedom of thought and religious practice. The law criminalizes attempts by non-Muslims to “shake the faith” of Moroccans from the Maliki-Ashari school of Islam, which the government has interpreted as prohibiting attempts to convert Muslims to other religions, including through the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials.

The constitution also stipulates that the king holds the Islamic title of Commander of the Faithful, Protector of Islam, and the guarantor of freedom to practice one’s religious affairs. As well, it provides that the king must approve all fatwas (authoritative religious guidance).

Government Practices

There were no reports of significant governmental actions affecting religious freedom in either the part of Western Sahara administered by Morocco or in the area controlled by the POLISARIO.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom in the territory with the Moroccan National Council for Human Rights, a quasi-governmental organization, within the context of official meetings and visits.