

WESTERN SAHARA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Kingdom of Morocco claims the territory of Western Sahara and administers the estimated 75 percent that 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 that seeks 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." 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 the portion of the territory administered by Morocco.

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 603,000 (July 2017 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 (MINURSO).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Morocco administers the territory in Western Sahara it controls by the same constitution, laws, and structures as 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 his religious affairs.”

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 to \$53). 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 to \$53). The law prohibits anyone from criticizing Islam in public platforms and requires all publicly-funded educational institutions to teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki-Ashari school. 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, is the protector of Islam, and is the guarantor of the freedom to practice religious affairs. It also states the king must approve all fatwas, which are recommended by the High Council of Ulema but only become binding after receiving the king’s approval and parliamentary legislation. 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.

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

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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