

WESTERN SAHARA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Moroccan laws and restrictions regarding religious organizations and religious freedom apply to the area of the Western Sahara that it administers (approximately 85 percent). The Moroccan constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom in the territory; however, in practice, the Moroccan government restricted religious freedom in some cases. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were no known reports of anti-Semitism.

The U.S. embassy and ambassador discussed religious freedom with the Moroccan government within the context of official visits and a bilateral strategic dialogue.

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. There were no reports of abuses or of restrictions on religious freedom in that sparsely populated part of the territory.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to U.S. government estimates, the population is 523,000. The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim. Islamic practice is frequently characterized by maraboutism, the veneration of religious figures and the tombs in which they are believed to be interred. There is a small group of Roman Catholics who live and worship freely.

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/Policy Framework

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The Moroccan constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. Due to continuing Moroccan administrative control of approximately 85 percent of the territory, laws, and restrictions regarding religious organizations and religious freedom for most of the territory are the same as those in the kingdom of Morocco. The POLISARIO administer the remaining sparsely populated territory.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Moroccan law prohibited efforts to proselytize Muslims who adhere to the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. Conversion from Islam was discouraged but not explicitly prohibited.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and senior administration officials discussed religious freedom with the Moroccan government within the context of official visits. Through a bilateral strategic dialogue, the United States and Morocco agreed to explore further cooperation to promote understanding and interfaith dialogue.