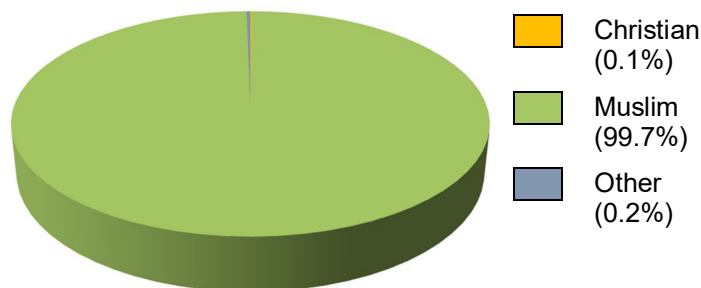


MOROCCO



Area: 710 850 km ²	Population: 32.6 million	Political system: Monarchy	Major Language(s): Arabic, Berber, French
---	------------------------------------	--------------------------------------	---

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Morocco is a hereditary Monarchy ruled by a Sunni dynasty established for centuries. The incumbent Monarch is King Mohammed VI. He is considered to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. More than 99 percent of the country's population are Sunni Muslims of the Maliki-Ashari school. Other religious groups – including Jews – constitute less than one percent of the population. The Jewish community is very old and the majority left after the establishment of the State of Israel. Community leaders estimate the number of Jews to be at most only 4,000, with the majority living in Casablanca.

The Catholic Church estimates the number of Christians of all denominations to be as high as 25,000. Other sources give a number of just 5,000. The vast majority of Christians are foreigners. They use the churches built during the French protectorate in force until 1956. It is not clear how many Muslim citizens have converted to Christianity. Some put the figure as high as 8,000.

There are small Shi'a and Baha'i groups living in the country.

According to the Moroccan constitution, Morocco is a sovereign Muslim state. Article 3 reads: "Islam is the state religion, which guarantees to all the free exercise of worship."¹ The constitution therefore prohibits political parties, parliamentarians or constitutional amendments to infringe upon Islam.²

Article 41 says that the King is "Commander of the Faithful [Amir Al Mouminin], sees to the respect for Islam. He is the Guarantor of the free exercise of beliefs. He presides over the Superior Council of the Ulemas, charged with the study of questions that He submits to it. The Council is the sole instance enabled to comment on the religious consultations (Fatwas) before being officially agreed to, on the questions to which it has been referred and this, on the basis of the tolerant principles, precepts and designs of Islam. The attributions, the composition and the modalities of functioning of the Council are established by Dahir [Royal Decree]."

Proselytism by non-Muslims among the Muslim population is strictly forbidden.³ The distribution of non-Islamic religious materials is forbidden therefore too.⁴

Article 220 of the civil penal code proscribes a punishment of anything from six months to three years imprisonment, plus a fine of 100 to 500 Dirham (about US\$13) for any person employing “means of seduction with the aim of converting a Muslim to another religion, whether by exploiting his weakness or his needs, whether by using teaching establishments, health establishments, retirement homes or orphanages for this end”.

Evangelical ministers in particular have been denied entry to the country or have been deported in the past. There are reports about similar cases during the period of this report.⁵

Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.⁶ However there were cases reported which include a Moroccan convert to Christianity who was arrested.⁷ Morocco does not impose the death penalty against apostates from Islam under the provisions of its Penal Code. However, in April 2013, the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars issued a religious decree (fatwa) that Moroccan Muslims who leave Islam must be sentenced to death.⁸ For now the government has not followed up on the fatwa.

Morocco’s law criminalising blasphemy became increasingly strict during the period under review.⁹ Article 219 of the law provides for “imprisonment from one year to five years” against anyone guilty of “undermining”, “offending”, or “insulting” God and the prophets by any means. Article 223 sets a conviction of six months to two years imprisonment for the perpetrators of vandalism of places of worship or sacred religious texts.¹⁰

Personal status affairs for Muslim citizens are regulated by the country’s interpretation of *Shari’a* law. Male Muslim citizens can marry non-Muslim women. But female Muslim citizens cannot marry non-Muslim men. Jews have rabbinical courts which oversee their personal status affairs such as marriage or inheritance.

The breaking of the Ramadan fast in public is a crime punished by the penal code with six months in prison and a fine of up to 500 dirhams.

Incidents

Both government and society act to restrict religious freedom for citizens. But there have also been some encouraging signs.

An Appeal Court in Fez overturned a conviction against a Christian convert from Islam because of lack of evidence in September 2014. He had been sentenced to 30 months in prison for alleged proselytising. Mohamed El Baladi, 31, was arrested on 28th August 2014 in the town of Ain Aicha (Taounate province), about 80km from Fez, on charges of proselytizing after he was accused of trying to push two young Muslims to convert. Police raided his home, where they seized several Christian CDs, books and magazines. During the raid, they insulted El Baladi for leaving Islam and tried to force him to reveal names of other converts to Christianity. Later, it was revealed that the accusation of proselytising had come from El Baladi’s uncle, who was opposed to his conversion to Christianity. On 3rd September, a court in Taounate sentenced El Baladi to 30 months in prison and a fine of 1,500 Moroccan dirhams (about US\$ 182). Human rights groups slammed the ruling

because the accused was denied legal counsel and received a fine that exceeded the maximum allowed by law. The penalty for violating Morocco's penal code is six months to three years in prison and fines of up to 500 dirhams. El Baladi was eventually able to show that his conversation with two young Muslims was not designed to convert them, but to explain his reasons for conversion.¹¹ There were other reported cases of interrogation of suspected converts from Islam by the police.¹²

During the period under review, the government expelled many Evangelical Christians from the country after accusing them of proselytising. In particular, Evangelical ministers and volunteers have been deported. For 10 years, foreign Christians ran an orphanage called the Village of Hope on the slopes of Morocco's Middle Atlas Mountains, taking in abandoned Moroccan children and raising them in their homes. But it took just a few hours in August 2014 for Moroccan authorities to dissolve those foster families. Police gathered the 16 foreign volunteers and their biological children in a conference room and told them they had to leave the country immediately. 33 Moroccan children learned they would stay behind. Morocco's Interior Ministry claims the group "exploited some families' poverty and targeted their minor children," violating rules on guardianship and breaking Morocco's laws banning proselytising to Muslims. Foreign Christian leaders in Morocco say the deportations are part of a country-wide campaign that signals a tough new stance against foreign evangelists who had been tolerated for years. Orphanage administrator Chris Broadbent, from New Zealand, said the staff never tried to convert anyone, and maintained the orphanage had followed the same policies since it opened a decade ago: the children learned the *Qur'an* in school, but were raised by Christian parents. Those expelled came from the Netherlands, UK, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil and the United States.¹³

In December 2014 Morocco's Cinema Commission, part of the Ministry of Communications, banned the Hollywood film *Exodus* from theatres, citing Islam's prohibition on the depiction of God. Some members of the government criticised the ban, as did Morocco's association of filmmakers.¹⁴

In April 2015 Morocco's interior ministry announced the arrest of four people in the Western Sahara after they allegedly issued a fatwa authorising the burning alive of a person they accused of rejecting Islam. It said the four members of a "terrorist cell" detained in the disputed territory's main city of Laayoune had planned to "carry out dangerous terrorist crimes" in Morocco. It said an investigation had revealed the suspects' "total acceptance" of the Islamic State group's agenda.¹⁵

In November 2015 Moroccan police arrested four people suspected of belonging to a militant cell linked to the Daesh (ISIS) militant group. Around 1,500 Moroccan nationals were reported to be fighting with armed groups in Syria and Iraq. Authorities said earlier this year 220 have returned home and been jailed and 286 have been killed.¹⁶ The U.S. State Department said it appreciated Morocco's leadership in countering violent extremism and welcomed the creation of the Mohammed VI Institute of Training of Imams, Morchidines and Morchidates from Morocco and other African, Arab and European countries.¹⁷

In January 2016 a large conference of Muslim scholars was hosted in Marrakesh to promote the right of religious minorities in Muslim countries. An appeal to develop an Islamic jurisprudence on the concept of citizenship, inclusive of all groups, was signed on 27th January by 250 leading Islamic scholars gathered in Marrakech. The initiative came at the invitation of the Ministry of Promotion and Islamic Business of Morocco and the Forum for the Promotion of Peace in Islamic societies, based in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁸

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

The government's struggle against jihadi terrorism risks undermining its credibility which is cantered on Islam. With an evident shift in society towards Islamic conservatism, experts say that "the general direction of the country does not jibe with the idea that Morocco is making an effort to root out extremist ideologies". Moroccan political scientist Abdeslam Maghraoui continues: "Morocco is definitely getting more conservative, and the government doesn't know how to handle it."¹⁹

¹ http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/morocco_eng.pdf

² See Morocco in U.S. International Religious Freedom Report 2014

³ http://www.iirf.eu/index.php?id=249&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=248&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4917

⁴ U.S. International Religious Freedom Report 2014

⁵ http://www.iirf.eu/index.php?id=249&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=248&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4917

⁶ <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/07/162856/there-is-no-law-that-punishes-apostasy-moroccan-minister/>

⁷ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/takeaction/pray/tag-prayer-updates-post/morocco-christian-arrested/>

See also: <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/01/149976/morocco-christian-convert-arrested-in-fez/>

⁸ http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/#_ftn54

⁹ <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/04/155330/morocco-toughens-law-against-blasphemy-sexual-harassment/>

¹⁰ <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/04/155330/morocco-toughens-law-against-blasphemy-sexual-harassment/>

¹¹ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Christian-convert-from-Islam-exonerated-from-charges-of-proselytising-30268.html>

¹² <http://adlr.org/2015/03/10/n-e-marruecos-detiene-a-un-joven-sospechoso-de-hacerse-cristiano/>

¹³ http://www.hrwf.net/images/forbnews/2014/Morocco_2014.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/morocco>

¹⁵ <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2015/04/morocco-arrests-four-over-burning-alive-fatwa/>

¹⁶ <http://timesofoman.com/article/71831/World/Middle-East/Morocco-arrests-four-militants-with-'links'-to-IS-militant-group-planning-to-carry-out-attacks-using>

¹⁷ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240531.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.fides.org/en/news/59284#.Vq-A350weM8>

¹⁹ <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/04/16/moroccan-government-delves-into-citizens-religious-lives-to-purge-extremism>