

Country Profile

Morocco

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 35.6 million (September 14, 2019)¹

Religious affiliation* (percent)

Muslims	99
Other	1

* Morocco’s census does not identify ethnic or religious background. Estimates suggest around 99% of Moroccans are Sunni Muslims religiously or culturally. The country’s Jewish minority has decreased significantly since the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948. Today there are about 3,000 Moroccan Jews inside the country. There is a small but apparently growing minority of Moroccan Christians who are local Moroccan converts.

Role of religion in state and government

The preamble of the constitution, which was adopted in July 2011 by 95 % of the voters, proclaims that, as “A sovereign Muslim State, attached to its national unity and to its territorial integrity, the Kingdom of Morocco intends to preserve, in its plenitude and its diversity, its one and indivisible national identity. Its unity, is forged by the convergence of its Arab-Islamist, Berber and Saharan-Hassanic components, nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences. The pre-eminence accorded to the Muslim religion in the national reference is consistent with the attachment of the Moroccan people to the values of openness, of moderation, of tolerance and of dialog for mutual understanding between all the cultures and the civilizations of the world.” Article 3 of the same constitution states that “Islam is the religion of the State, which guarantees to all the free exercise of beliefs”.

Concerning the administration/management of the religious sphere, it falls entirely within the authority of the king, who also, according to the constitution, wields chief executive power, is president of the judicial authority and serves as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Thus, according to the article 41 of the constitution, “The King, Prince (Commander) of the Faithful (*Amir Al Mouminine*), sees to the respect for Islam. He is the Guarantor of the free exercise of beliefs. He presides over the Superior Council of the Ulema (Conseil superieur des Oulema), charged with the study of questions that He submits to it. The Council is the sole instance enabled to comment (se prononcer, in French) 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 King exercises by Dahirs (Laws) the religious prerogatives inherent to the institution of the Emirate (the Principality) of the Faithful which are conferred to him in exclusive manner by this Article.”

Under this umbrella, the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs exerts full authority over official mosques and other religious institutions, and on all religious activities and similar events in the country.

¹ Source: High Commission for Plan, Rabat, Morocco. <https://www.hcp.ma/> (Seen on September 14, 2019).

Freedom of religion

The preamble to Morocco's current constitution - adopted after the beginning of Arab spring protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria – states that the “Kingdom of Morocco”, “with fidelity to its irreversible choice to construct a democratic State of Law, resolutely pursues the process of consolidation and of reinforcement of the institutions of a modern State, having as its bases the principles of participation, of pluralism and of good governance. It develops a society of solidarity where all enjoy security, liberty, equality of opportunities, of respect for their dignity and for social justice, within the framework of the principle of correlation between the rights and the duties of the citizenry”.

In article 1 of the same constitution, one can read, “The Nation relies for its collective life on the federative constants, on the occurrence of moderate Muslim religion, on the national unity of its multiple components, on the constitutional monarchy and on democratic choice”. It further states that “Morocco is a constitutional, democratic, parliamentary and social Monarchy. The constitutional regime of the Kingdom is founded on the separation, the balance and the collaboration of the powers, as well as on participative democracy of the citizen, and the principles of good governance and of the correlation between the responsibility for and the rendering of accounts. The Nation relies for its collective life on the federative constants, on the occurrence of moderate Muslim religion, on the national unity of its multiple components, on the constitutional monarchy and on democratic choice”.

There is a strong imbrication between the religious and political spheres in the country. And as a central factor of legitimization of the monarchy, Islam is being rehabilitated progressively in its most traditional values. This rehabilitation reflects a strong contradiction between formal proclamations of freedom, democracy and modernity stated the constitution and the laws applied in all the domains which are in direct or indirect accord with Islam. In this sense, the constitution seems directed more towards foreign chancelleries and public opinion, while domestic laws seek to ensure the continuity of the internal, religious and social public order.

Indeed, while the constitution proclaims freedom of worship and equality between men and women, the Moroccan Penal code continues to be based on laws completely inspired by religion/Islam. For example:

- Eating in public spaces (Article 222 of the Moroccan Penal Code): This allows punishment with one to six months imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams if a person "considered as Muslim ostensibly eats in a public place during the time of Ramadan, without reason admitted by this religion ".
- Sexual relations out of wedlock (Article 490): "The penalty is the imprisonment of a month to a year."
- Inheritance: Women still receive only half of what men receive when goods are bequeathed by their parents. And any discussion relating to this subject is still a breach of public order, because the text of the Qur'an that prescribes such asymmetry "is clear about this matter".

- Testimony: Women's testimony is accepted neither in inheritance or marriage cases nor in criminal affairs.
- Marriage: If a Moroccan woman or man wishes to marry a non-Moroccan (i.e. a non-Muslim), special permission called “mixed marriage authorization” is required.
- The sale and consumption of alcohol: Theoretically the sale of wine (and beer) to Moroccans and its consumption by them are prohibited in Morocco. However, for various reasons, including the fiscal resources collected by the State at this occasion, these operations are generally tolerated, and the law seems to be applied only to punish public drunkenness. But the same operations are totally prohibited in public spaces during the month of Ramadan (and also few days before and after) and at the occasion of religious feasts. This, which represents a true social hypocrisy on the part of the state, is considered a form of “respect for religion”.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

From the end of the 1970s, Morocco experienced a rise of conservatism and increasing radicalisation, particularly among its youth population. This came in connection with a set of international events, and in parallel with domestic economic, social and political developments.

Notable external events include the wars of Afghanistan (from the 1970s until today) and Bosnia. The war in Afghanistan against the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was initially seen as a war between Islam and communism. From 2001, with the American intervention, the Afghan wars have been seen as a confrontation between the West, represented by the USA, and Islam. The Bosnian War, which began in 1992 and lasted until 1995, led to the deaths of around 100,000 civilians and soldiers, at least 25,000 of which were Bosnian Muslims. Within this war, the massacre in Srebrenica (11/16 July 1995) of 8,372 Bosnian civilians had an immense impact in the Arab-Muslim world, including Morocco.

To the effects of these wars, one must add the consequences on the Arab (and Muslim) public opinion of the Intifadas of 1987 and 2000 in the occupied Palestinian territories, the wars in Iraq (from 2003) and in Syria (from 2011).

The effects of these external events have been amplified inside Morocco and other Arab-Muslim countries by the conjunction of socio-economic and political elements, making a large part of the population - especially young people - more sensitive to the arguments of the supporters of a form of political Islam that attributes Muslim suffering (manifested in socio-economic and political problems) to separation from the “true values of Islam” and perceived hatred of Muslims by Westerners. Domestic problems include widespread poverty, imbalanced distribution of national wealth, youth unemployment, high levels of illiteracy, poor provision of health care, educational failure, and the progressive weakening of traditional political parties.

In the 1980s and 1990s this led to the strengthening of radical Islamist currents under the influence of trends related to Saudi Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then, young Moroccans have been involved in various terrorist acts in Europe and in Morocco, and hundreds have joined wars in the Middle East, particularly starting in 2011.

Religious diversity governance assessment

As stated in Article 41 of the Constitution, "The King - Prince (Commander) of the Faithful (*Amir Al Mouminine*) - sees to the respect for Islam. He is the Guarantor of the free exercise of beliefs." This guarantee for the free exercise of worship seems to operate only for Jews and Christians, who are free to practice their religion as it suits them. But Moroccans who are supposed to be Muslims - even if some of them do not consider themselves as such and many are not practicing - are obliged by the law to abstain from eating in public during the month of Ramadan, to not drink wine, and to not change their religion.

Regarding this last point, even though the Moroccan penal code does not provide the death penalty for the apostates of Islam (unlike, for example, Saudi Arabia, Iran or the United Arab Emirates), the fact remains that this freedom is allowed only for "non-Muslim Moroccans". This renders article 41 effectively meaningless. The subject remains extremely sensitive and poses a great threat to many Moroccans: even if voluntary conversion is not considered as a crime, proselytizing can be punished with a sentence of 6 months to 3 years in prison. Moroccan law defines a proselytizer as: "Anyone who uses means of seduction for the purpose of shaking the faith of a Muslim or converting him/her to another religion, either by exploiting his/her weakness or his/her needs, or by using for such purposes educational institutions, health centers, asylums or orphanages. "

Feeling threatened by this state of affairs, a group of Moroccans who have converted to Christianity issued a joint appeal to Pope Francis on the occasion of his visit to Morocco on 30-31 March 2019. They expressed their wish that the day would soon come when Morocco "assumes its religious diversity".

This same appeal was first issued in 2017 when the group formally lodged a set of complaints with Morocco's CNDH (National Council for Human Rights, whose president is appointed by the king). They petitioned for Moroccans converted to Christianity to be granted a number of rights, including: the option of having a civil wedding service instead of marriage in a church; the freedom to worship in temples and churches; the right to call their children by Christian names; and the right to bury the dead according to their tradition.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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