

Morocco: The limits of Islamic religious tolerance

10:31 AM 07/08/2010
ADVERTISEMENT

It took Christendom centuries, but religious tolerance eventually replaced persecution. Today it's hard to find a Christian society that genuinely persecutes.

In contrast, it is rare to find a Muslim nation that does not persecute. There are the few good, which allow other faiths to exist and publicly worship. More common are the bad and the ugly. In the latter, Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and other religious minorities face prison and even death. For instance, Somali Islamists recently publicly executed a Christian convert.

If you asked most evangelicals today where Morocco fits on the spectrum they'd probably say bad or ugly. The North African state has been denounced by missionaries, human rights activists, religious leaders, and members of Congress. One legislator even compared the Moroccans to Nazis.

It is a shocking turn for a nation that long has been among the good. A few years ago evangelical leaders proclaimed the country "open to evangelical Christian outreach."

Even Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) acknowledged that Rabat has been "a model of tolerance and modernity in the Arab world." But Morocco is now charged with religious persecution.

Morocco officially protects the liberty to convert. There have been complaints of social pressure and official harassment of converts, which reflects the limits of tolerance in most Islamic lands. But Moroccan converts to Christianity do not risk forfeiting their lives—in contrast to converts in countries as diverse as Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even Malaysia.

Morocco does, however, ban proselytism. Prohibiting the practice fits comfortably with Islam, Judaism, and even some established Christian sects that feel threatened by evangelizing Christian churches.

But restricting evangelism is a serious limitation for those who take seriously Christ's injunction to "go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19) Nevertheless, even when affected churches do not proselytize officially and openly, church members often do so unofficially and privately. An evangelical church in Kuwait, where the practice is similarly banned, posted the Great Commission over the door leading out of the church and the minister told me there were no restrictions on talking with Muslims who asked about the Christian faith.

Anyway, enforcement by Morocco appeared to be lax in recent years. Rabat allowed American and other Western Christians to reside in Morocco, some for many years. Several Americans ran the Village of Hope orphanage.

Then in March a number of foreign Christians were summarily deported; others, out of the country, were denied the right to return. Deportations continued in later months, though apparently Morocco dropped

several names from the latter list.

Some Christian groups put the total number of expulsions at 105. Congressional sources believe the number to be closer to half of that and most of the expelled are Americans. The Moroccan government says the larger numbers may include people who were interrogated, but claims that only five Americans were deported and another 25 were barred reentry, along with about ten other foreigners. There is similar disagreement over the numbers involved in a second round of deportations in May.

Exactly who did what remains a matter of controversy. Interior Minister Tayeb Cherkaoui charged:

“They are guilty of trying to undermine the faith of Muslims.” A representative of the king responded to a letter from Rep. Wolf: “The repatriation measures were not taken against the concerned parties in relation to their Christian faith, but because they had committed criminal offenses.”

Those expelled deny the charges. For instance, Michael Roger Cloud lived in Morocco for 14 years and ran therapy centers for cerebral palsy. He told a hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, “We have never asked Muslims to change their religion to Christianity.” He added, “To this day not one authority has said we did something wrong.”

One problem may be dueling definitions of proselytism. Advocates of anti-proselytism laws justify them as preventing coercion or undue inducement, but typically use them penalize simple evangelism.

More disturbing than deporting foreigners is the apparent case of Jamaa Ait Bakrim who, according to International Christian Concern, has been imprisoned for proselytizing. Citing Moroccan sources, ICC stated that Bakrim is serving a sentence of 15 years for proselytism and “destruction of the goods of others.”

ICC warned that Moroccan Christians are fearful and believe a broad interpretation of proselytism currently impinges on their freedom to practice. Moroccan officials with whom I spoke said they were unaware of the case.

Rabat’s actions understandably dismay Americans used to free exercise. But deporting accused missionaries is minor compared to practices common elsewhere in the Muslim world. Is something more going on? *Time* magazine claimed: “the Village of Hope deportations are part of what appears to be a widespread crackdown on Christian aid workers in Morocco.”

Morocco is a moderate authoritarian state, with some liberalization after King Mohammed VI took over in 1999. He even created a well-regarded human rights commission that has since paid compensation to the victims of human rights abuses under his father.

However, the king rules as well as reigns. The State Department’s annual human rights survey points to problems, including “arbitrary arrests” and “incommunicado detentions.” Katie Zoglin of Freedom House testified before the Commission that Morocco, rated as “partly free,” moved backward last year. She cited “stepped up repression of the country’s vigorous independent press.” But Morocco is one of the more progressive Muslim nations when it comes to the status of women.

Religious liberty in the majority Sunni country looks similar: generally free, but with some important restrictions. Last fall the State Department reported that the government “continued to sporadically enforce existing legal restrictions on religious freedom.”

Among other practices, Rabat “detained and interrogated a group of female citizens who had converted from Islam to Christianity and expelled five female Christian missionaries. The government restricts non-Islamic religious materials and proselytizing.” Some of the same procedures were used against Muslims, both Shia and Wahabbi.

While deportation evidently is not a new tactic, there is suspicion that the Moroccan government acted this year to flaunt its Islamic credentials. J. Dudley Woodbery, a senior professor in Islamic studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, surmised that the well-publicized increase in the number of Christians throughout North Africa left Rabat under added pressure from Islamists. In fact, the Organization of the Islamic Conference has pressed member states to remove their Christians.

There also is speculation recent personnel changes in the cabinet may have played a role. Observers point to tougher regulations governing liquor licenses and an arrest of Moroccans eating during Ramadan, both changes from the past. Some 7000 Muslim leaders recently signed a statement denouncing Christians in Morocco for “religious terrorism.” Yet the government resisted pressure to cancel Elton John from a recent music festival in Rabat.

Moroccan officials say they warned the U.S. embassy well ahead of time that the Americans were in danger of being deported. If so, apparently those warnings were not passed along. It also appears that the deportees were denied proper legal process, though Rabat justifies the procedures followed. But even Moroccan officials privately admit that the entire episode was botched and wish they could turn back time.

It’s all very disturbing, but Washington’s response should be proportional. Rep. Wolf has been leading the campaign to punish Rabat. That is not surprising. Rep. Wolf has generally promoted the “advancement of human rights and religious freedom,” says Joe Grieboski of the Institute on Religion and Public Policy.

Wolf deserves credit for drawing public attention to Morocco’s actions. However, the Commission hearing chaired by Wolf took on a partisan cast when no Democrats appeared. Moreover, Grieboski wonders how this case “reaches to the levels that Mr. Wolf has taken them in light of ever more severe outright persecution of religious minorities by other governments.”

For instance, Rep. Wolf urged Secretary of State Clinton to issue a travel advisory for Morocco. Yet the purpose of travel advisories is to warn travelers about potential dangers. Tourists obviously are not at risk. I visited Morocco on an official trip in May and visitors abounded without restriction. By this standard Washington should discourage Americans from visiting virtually any Muslim nation.

Rep. Wolf also questioned U.S. foreign aid for Morocco, which currently is the beneficiary of a five-year \$697.5 million assistance program. That’s a fair point, even though Washington has routinely subsidized states with far worse human rights records. But the better question is: why is America, which is running a \$1.6 trillion deficit this year, giving money to anyone? Morocco enjoyed rather robust 5.3 percent economic growth last year. Americans need the “aid” more than does Morocco or anyone else.

Finally, Rep. Wolf wrote Samuel Kaplan, American ambassador to Morocco, warning, “the outcome could negatively affect our bilateral relations.” Yet in a Muslim world where several regimes actively persecute religious minorities and promote violent extremism, Rabat stands apart at some political cost. Ilan Berman of the American Foreign Policy Council argued:

America desperately needs allies that are willing and able to promote moderate interpretations of Islam at the expense of more extreme ones. In Morocco, it is fortunate to have found one.

This doesn't mean Washington should be silent about violations of religious liberty. But its response should be measured. Are the deportations a onetime response to domestic pressure or a long-term policy change? Low-key diplomacy may be a more effective tactic to answer that question and limit any crackdown.

Moreover, as far as religious persecution goes, Morocco remains an amateur. Christians, Jews, and others in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Indonesia, and elsewhere can only wish they lived in Morocco. Several of these countries also are sources of terrorist funding and teaching. It is important to keep the spotlight on the worst oppressors.

Further, as Berman notes, Morocco remains a source of moderate Islamic interpretation. Any kind of Muslim reformation (or Vatican II) will have to come from within the Islamic world. Morocco, whose king officially traces his lineage back to the prophet Mohammed, may help this process. Developing more liberal Islamic societies is the ultimate solution for limits on religious liberty in Morocco and elsewhere.

Finally, the dialogue needs to reach beyond Washington. For instance, a group of evangelical pastors visited Morocco in May. Spokesman Rev. David Anderson of Sarasota, Florida, explained:

Our delegation came to Morocco to quietly pursue a better understanding of the complex circumstances surrounding these deeply troubling events. Moroccan culture highly values personal relationships and those of us who have experience here in Morocco feel strongly that working person to person is the best way to find a lasting resolution to a serious problem.

This kind of engagement ultimately may be more effective than government pressure in opening Moroccan society.

The Moroccan government has greatly disappointed its friends in America. The challenge is to find the best strategy to draw Rabat back to a policy of greater religious liberty and tolerance. Engaging rather than demonizing one of Washington's few real friends in the Arab world would seem to be the better route.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and the Senior Fellow in International Religious Persecution at the Institute on Religion and Public Policy. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics* (Crossway).*

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

Article printed from The Daily Caller – Breaking News, Opinion, Research, and Entertainment:
<http://dailycaller.com>

URL to article: <http://dailycaller.com/2010/07/08/morocco-the-limits-of-islamic-religious-tolerance/>

Copyright © 2009 Daily Caller. All rights reserved.

