

# Row brews over Moroccan alcohol law

RABAT, MOROCCO: A row is brewing in Morocco over the sensitive issue of selling alcohol to Moroccan Muslims, which is banned by a law that is broken openly every day.

A 1967 royal decree strictly forbids the sale or gift of alcoholic beverages to Muslims, who account for 98% of the population in this North African state. Offenders are liable to a prison sentence of up to six months and a fine of 150 to 500 dirhams (\$18 to \$60).

Yet sales and consumption are widely tolerated. Supermarkets enforce no restrictions on alcohol sales and bars in Morocco's cities make no attempt to hide the sale of alcoholic drinks to clients, Muslim or otherwise.

## Call to scrap ban

This quiet contradiction was shoved into the limelight in December when a Moroccan association for the defense of democratic values called for the ban on alcohol sales and consumption to be scrapped.

"The law which says alcohol can only be sold to foreigners is against the constitution, which recognises fundamental individual freedoms," the Bayt Al Hikma, or House of Wisdom, organisation, a non-religious group formed a few years ago, said in a statement.

The group is headed by Khadija Rouissi, a member of the rising Authenticity and Modernity Party founded two years ago by a friend of King Mohammed VI.

An opposition party in parliament, PAM supports the king, whose reforms have improved Morocco's human rights record and ended some inequities against women.

"The law forbidding the consumption and buying of alcohol by Moroccans must be repealed because it is a matter of individual liberty," Rouissi told said.

## Opposition

The alcohol ban is firmly backed by the vocal Islamist opposition Justice and Development Party (PJD), which is aiming to be a political force in the country.

Already last May party activists staged a sit-in outside a newly built shopping centre to protest yet another outlet for alcohol sales.

In December, shortly before Bayt Al Hikma issued its statement, a cleric close to the PJD, Ahmed Raissouni, published a fatwa, or religious edict, urging Moroccans to boycott all supermarkets selling alcohol.

"There is a law forbidding the consumption of alcohol by Moroccans and it is clear," said a PJD leader Saad Eddine Othmani. "It must be respected."

## **Production permitted**

Yet another Moroccan contradiction complicates matters: production of alcohol is allowed by state law.

The domestic wine industry is both substantial and increasingly lucrative, in a country where reducing unemployment, around 9.7% in 2007, according to government figures, is seen as vital to domestic stability and agriculture is a key economic sector.

Today the kingdom has some 12,000 hectares (30,000 acres) of vineyards and produces between 30,000,000 and 40,000,000 litres, or more than 30 million bottles, of wine a year, according to unofficial figures from industry sources.

Half of this is quality wine thanks to a two-decade effort to switch from mainly red table wines to better varieties.

## **Employment and revenue**

Turnover for the wine industry amounts to some one billion dirhams (\$130 million), and the industry employs some 10,000 people.

Alcohol is also taxed, and in 2006 the state collected 723 million dirhams, most of it on beer and the rest on wine and spirits.

And most of the domestic production, about 85%, is drunk locally, according to the unofficial figures often cited by non-governmental groups.

Unofficial figures quoted in 2007 by the independent weekly *TelQuel*, still considered valid, said Moroccans drank 50,000,000 litres of alcoholic drinks a year, putting alcohol in second position in terms of national beverage consumption, behind tea and ahead of milk.

Political commentator Mohammed Darif criticised Bayt Al Hikma's position as illogical since Rouissi's party, PAM, backs the king.

## **Law reforms**

"When the king presented his plan on reforming the law on women to parliament in October 2003, he said he could not 'permit what Islam forbids'," noted Darif. And Islam formally forbids alcohol consumption by Muslims.

As to where the debate will head, law professor Michele Zirari at Rabat University saw no quick change in the status quo.

"You must realize that the alcohol trade generates profits for the Moroccan state, even if the general tendency is towards conservatism given the growing influence of religion within Moroccan society," she said.

"I don't see any substantial change in the short, or medium, term," she added.

*Source: AFP*

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