

ALGERIA

Overview

- Algeria's population is estimated at 41 million, of whom approximately 15% identify as Amazigh (Berber). The population is 98% Sunni Muslim
- Minority Christian communities have long been marginalised. The latest wave of systematic pressure started in November 2017.
- Churches are regulated by the government. Although there is a procedure for churches to apply for official recognition, no registrations have been granted.
- The legal status of many churches is ambiguous. Churches are being closed under the guise of "safety inspections."
- Any Christian activities conducted outside places of worship approved for that purpose are subject to sanctions, including under blasphemy and anti-proselytism laws.

Christian Communities

Ninety-eight per cent of the population is Muslim, with an estimated Christian population of 100,000-300,000, mainly Roman Catholic and Protestant.

The Roman Catholic church is officially recognised. Also recognised is the Protestant Church of Algeria, the EPA (L'Église Protestante d'Algérie), an umbrella organisation which received government recognition as a religious association in 1974. Individual churches must also apply for registration, with permission rarely granted.

The Algerian church has seen significant growth in recent years, with many new believers coming to faith through dreams and visions, and through Christian media ministries. Much of this growth has been in the Kabylie region, the Amazigh (Berber) heartland.

Legal Context

The constitution of Algeria establishes Islam as the state religion and prohibits government institutions from undertaking practices contrary to Islamic morals. Theoretically, revisions to the constitution in February 2016 further strengthened individual freedoms by mentioning 'freedom of religious worship.' However, these revisions have not been incorporated into laws guaranteeing these freedoms. Instead, restrictive laws on worship still apply. Rights of association for religious groups are closely regulated by the Ministry of the Interior, and non-Muslim worship is restricted to premises designated and approved for that purpose. Strict blasphemy and anti-proselytism laws are also in force, and Islamic law is applied on personal status issues.

Pressure Points

Under Islamic law, those who leave Islam are considered apostates. Although apostasy is not a criminal offence in Algeria, blasphemy and anti-proselytism laws have been used against Christian converts and those active in Christian ministry. For converts, societal pressure can be very great. Personal status law is based on Islamic principles. Those who leave Islam may be deprived of inheritance rights, forcibly divorced or be deprived of custody of their children.

Since 2006, any group wanting to use a building for non-Muslim worship must get permission from by the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups. In practice, however, this Commission has never actually met. Despite many applications, therefore, no permission has been granted for buildings to be used as churches. Faced with this impasse, churches typically rent buildings and inform the local authorities that these locations will be used as places of worship. But they are frequently challenged to prove their compliance with the law, and/or with building safety regulations. This has resulted in a wave of closure orders to churches in the Kabylie region and the south of Algeria. Since November 2017, at least ten churches have been closed or ordered to cease all activities.

Although the EPA has been officially recognised since 1974, it has been hampered by new legislation governing associations that came into force in 2012. The EPA attempted to re-register under the new law but has not received any response from the authorities – not even an acknowledgement of the application. As a result, the EPA is now technically illegal – further adding to the challenge that EPA-affiliated churches face in registering places of worship.

In 2011 Algerian Christians requested the return of three historic church buildings for use by churches. These buildings are recognised as places of worship. However, no action has been taken by the authorities to have the buildings returned for their intended use as churches.

Case Study

In January 2018, the pastor of a church in Tiaret was surprised to learn that he had been convicted in absentia on 24 December 2017, sentenced to two years in imprisonment and given a 50,000-dinar fine (approximately US \$435). The conviction was on a charge of proselytism, based on an incident more than two and a half years previously.

In March 2015, the pastor had been arrested and briefly detained as he travelled from Tiaret to another city, when 54 Bibles were found in his car. He was subjected to lengthy interrogation concerning the source of the books, their destination and purpose. The law prohibits the production, warehousing or distribution of any material which aims to 'agitate the faith of Muslims.' When interrogated, he stated that the books were intended for a Church community and not for proselytizing. The pastor was released, and the books were returned to him.

Although he thought that was the end of the matter, the case was in fact referred to a prosecutor –leading to the in-absentia conviction and sentencing in December 2017.

He lodged an appeal, and on 8 March 2018 the sentence was changed to a 100,000-dinar fine (approximately US \$875) and three months' imprisonment (suspended). Following a further appeal, the suspended prison sentence was withdrawn on 16 May 2018, but the conviction and fine stand.

Quote

Rev. Mahmoud Haddad, EPA President, responding to the closure notice served on a church by government authorities:

“The new Constitution, passed in February 2016, has duly established freedom of religious worship. Its Article 36 clearly states that freedom of religious worship is guaranteed in compliance with the law. The house where the church conducts its worship was rented on behalf of the EPA, which has an official agreement from the Ministry of the Interior. Most churches affiliated with the EPA are in the same situation. They rent rooms or houses to celebrate their worship. Are authorities going to send such notifications to all these churches? It is an unjust law against Christians, who were denied their right to worship and the opportunity to share the Gospel freely.”

Prayer Points

Please pray for:

- Algerian Christians to know the Lord's presence, strength and wisdom as they face pressures from the authorities and within society.
- An end to church closure orders and for the government to allow the freedom of worship.
- The government to grant churches immediate permission to use their rented places of worship, without further delay.
- The Commission for Non-Muslim Worship to respond to applications within the designated 60-day deadline.
- The return of historic church buildings to the EPA.
- The EPA to be once again officially recognised by the government.
- Freedom of religion to be respected for all the people of Algeria, and an end to the use of the laws and the courts to harass and intimidate Christians.
- Algerian Christians to maintain clear and faithful witness to Christ.

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