

# **ECtHR/GREECE: 25 May 1993 – 25 May 2018 : 25th anniversary of Kokkinakis case, the first religious freedom case ruled by the European Court**

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (24.05.2018) – On 25 May 1993, the European Court of Human Rights held, by six votes to three, that there had been a breach of Article 9 of the European Convention (freedom of religion or belief) in the case *Kokkinakis v. Greece* (*Application no. [14307/88](#)*).

The *Kokkinakis* case is a landmark judgment and a pilot case of the European Court of Human Rights. In 1993, it was the first religious freedom case with which the European Court was confronted. Its decision endorsing the fundamental right to share one's beliefs with others concerned not only Greece but all the 47 member states of the Council of Europe and their populations, around 820 million people in all. However, beyond the case, there was a man...



***Beyond the court case, there was a man***

I had the privilege to know Minos Kokkinakis. I met him in his apartment in Crete for an interview, I publicized his case during the lengthy proceedings in Strasbourg and I organized a press conference with him in Brussels. He was interviewed by the national Belgian television for the evening TV news and despite his age (84), he captivated the interviewer with his energy and his passion for the defence of his rights. He was a charismatic fighter for justice.

Mr Minos Kokkinakis (1909-1999), a retired shopkeeper of Greek nationality, was born into an Orthodox family at Sitia (Crete) in 1909. After becoming a Jehovah's Witness in 1936, he was arrested more than 60 times for proselytism. He was also interned and imprisoned on several occasions.

The periods of internment, which were ordered by the administrative authorities on the grounds of his activities in religious matters, were spent on various islands in the Aegean

Sea (Amorgos, Milos, Makronisos...).

These periods of imprisonment, to which he was sentenced by the courts, were mainly for acts of proselytism (three sentences of two and a half months in 1939 – he was the first Jehovah's Witness to be convicted under the Laws of the Metaxas Government -, four and a half months in 1949 and two months in 1962), for conscientious objection (eighteen and a half months in 1941) and for holding a religious meeting in a private house (six months in 1952).

During the German occupation in WWII, in 1941, he was arrested as a conscientious objector. He could have been executed for that but he had a deeply rooted belief that God had prevented him, and the other Christians, from killing human beings. He was ready to die for that.

In his lifetime, Mr. Kokkinakis served a cumulative total of more than six years in prison.

On 2 March 1986 he and his wife called at the home of Mrs Kyriakaki in Sitia and engaged in a discussion with her. Mrs Kyriakaki's husband, who was the cantor at a local Orthodox church, informed the police, who arrested Mr and Mrs Kokkinakis and took them to the local police station, where they spent the night of 2-3 March 1986.

He ultimately appealed his last conviction to the ECtHR. The court issued its decision on 25 May 1993 in his favor, stating that the Greek government had breached Article 9 of the ECHR

(freedom of religion).

More than ever, this case is bearing fruit, especially in post-Soviet countries where the right to share one's beliefs is more and more restricted, and criminalized. His case is a beacon in the night for all the lawyers who defend the right of believers, whatever their religion, to share their beliefs with others.

The current drama is that more and more illiberal governments in the CoE space and beyond turn a blind eye to that "disturbing court decision" and combat it in law and in practice.

***Greece was the only EU country to criminalize the right to share one's beliefs***

Minos Kokkinakis and his wife were prosecuted under section 4 of Law no. 1363/1938 making proselytism an offence. This law, which was adopted during the dictatorship of Metaxas (1936-40), was exclusively used to protect the Orthodox Church and was in force for more than 45 years.

In 1939, that section was amended by section 2 of Law no. 1672/1939, in which the meaning of the term "proselytism" was clarified as such:

"1. Anyone engaging in proselytism shall be liable to imprisonment and a fine of between 1,000 and 50,000 drachmas;

he shall, moreover, be subject to police supervision for a period of between six months and one year to be fixed by the court when convicting the offender.

The term of imprisonment may not be commuted to a fine.

2. By 'proselytism' is meant, in particular, any direct or indirect attempt to intrude on the religious beliefs of a person of a different religious persuasion (eterodoxos), with the aim of undermining those beliefs, either by any kind of inducement or promise of an inducement or moral support or material assistance, or by fraudulent means or by taking advantage of his inexperience, trust, need, low intellect or naïvety.
3. The commission of such an offence in a school or other educational establishment or a philanthropic institution shall constitute a particularly aggravating circumstance."

More than ever, the Kokkinakis case is bearing fruit, especially in post-Soviet countries where the right to proselytize is more and more restricted, and criminalized. His case is a beacon in the night for all the lawyers who have defend the right of believers, whatever their religion, to share their beliefs with others.

The drama is that more and more illiberal governments in the CoE space and beyond turn a blind eye to that "disturbing court decision" and combat it in law and in practice.

## ***Greek Dictator Metaxas' spirit is back***

Unfortunately, the evil spirit of Dictator Metaxas is back on the European continent...

In April 2017, **Russia** banned the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist (!). Its 350 congregations and its headquarters have been declared illegal and their properties have been confiscated by the state. The 175,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia may not exercise their freedom of religion anymore, and if they do they are prosecuted. Six of them have been in custody for several months, including a Danish citizen living in Russia with his wife and their children. He has been behind bars for 1 year and is currently being tried. (See the upcoming issue of Newsweek: <http://www.newsweek.com/jehovahs-witnesses-939860> and HRWF Database of FORB Prisoners at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>)

Metaxas' anti-proselytism laws have risen from the ashes in Russia under the name of the "Varovaya laws". They are applied in practice to members of non-Orthodox religions: not only to Jehovah's Witnesses are being prosecuted but also Protestants now.

***More reading***

Court judgment: <https://bit.ly/2IMbRgw>

World news Media:  
<https://www.theworldnewsmedia.org/topic/30475-minos-kokkinakis/>

Independent: <https://ind.pn/2s2DGdW>

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## **ALGERIA: Protestant churches in Algeria call on government to treat them fairly**

World Watch Monitor (23.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2x8uvxx> – The organisation linking 45 Protestant churches in Algeria, l'Eglise Protestante d'Algérie (EPA), has called on the Algerian government to lift its measure for closing down

churches, and to give equal treatment under the Maghreb country's constitution.

“As full citizens, we call on the highest authorities in the country to ensure that all the fundamental rights of the citizen are protected, regardless of their religious affiliation”, said EPA, in a statement on 18 May.

Since November, four churches have been closed down: three churches – all affiliated to EPA – in Oran and one in Akbou.

A number of other churches have received notifications to close down immediately.

EPA had been officially recognised by the government since 1974. But in 2012 new laws meant that it had to re-register. Despite meeting all the legal requirements and applying for re-registration in 2013, the EPA is yet to receive a response, meaning, technically, it lacks official legal status.

EPA denounced this as an “injustice” against its communities. It said “the churches located in Ain-Turk, Layaida, and Oran-city, were sealed off as directed by the Prefet of Oran, respectively on 17 November 2017 and on 27 February 2018, at the same time as two women's association – thanks to the mobilization of civil society – have been authorized to re-open their doors. But strangely not the Christian religious associations” in the statement signed by the President of EPA, pastor Mahmoud Haddad.



The Algerian government has been criticised for discrimination against the country's Christian minority. Churches and individual Christians have faced increased restrictions in recent months, raising concerns that these pressures signal a "coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities", according to Christian advocacy group [Middle East Concern](#).

EPA's statement coincided with the celebration of the UN International Day of Living Together' (on 16 May) an initiative launched by NGOs, including the Alawiyya Sufi Association, led by Algerian-born [Sheikh Khaled Bentounes](#), involved in interfaith dialogue.

That initiative is also supported by Algerian authorities. EPA recalled that President Abdulaziz Bouteflika has recently insisted on the need for Algerians to live together peacefully, without 'exclusiveness' or 'exclusion'.

Still, some "Algerians, because of their Christian faith, continue to be victims of bullying and prosecution for the mere fact of being in possession of a Bible", points out EPA.

On 16 May, a court in Tiaret, about 300 kilometres southwest of the capital, Algiers, upheld a verdict against a church leader for transporting Bibles.

Noureddine Belabbes, 30, was found guilty of proselytising and

fined 100,000 Algerian dinars (c. US\$ 860) and legal expenses.

His case goes back to March 2015, when, while travelling with another Christian, his car was pulled over by the police, as [WWM reported](#).

They were then arrested and their case was referred to a prosecutor. In December 2017, they were each sentenced to two years in prison and a 50,000 dinar fine (c. \$450).

But at their appeal hearing on 8 March, the judge overturned the jail sentences, instead giving them suspended sentences of three months each. However, their fines were doubled.

On Monday (18 May), as this decision was again confirmed, Nouredine said he will not again appeal the decision. "I am tired. The police keep monitoring all our movements. I do not want to inflict more pain on my family than that; I have chosen to pay the fine".

On 3 May, a court in Dar-El-Beida, an eastern district of the capital Algiers, overturned a prison sentence, but upheld a fine, against [another Christian convicted for carrying a Bible](#) and other Christian items.

Idir Hamdad, 29, had been convicted in absentia on 28 September 2017 (though he only learned about this five months later) and given the maximum sentence of six months in prison, as well as a fine of 20,000 dinars (roughly \$175).

His case dates back to April 2016, when he was arrested at the airport following a complaint by the customs office.

World Watch Monitor understands that the men were convicted under Algeria's 2006 law regulating non-Muslim worship, which forbids the printing, storing and distribution of materials intended to "shake the faith" of a Muslim.

Last month, three pastors from Algeria were in the UK to ask that its leaders lobby the Algerian government to stop its current crackdown on its Christian minority.

Mustafa Krim, Ali Khidri and Youssef Ourahmane, representing EPA, wanted to ensure that Christians are provided for under Algerian law, that the laws are respected and implemented and that Algeria fulfils its commitment to freedom of religion or belief as stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

They met government ministers and parliamentarians in Westminster before continuing on to France and to speak to senior EU officials.

The pastors are lobbying for the de-regulation of places of worship, official recognition for the EPA, an end to anti-proselytism laws, and freedom to import Christian materials.

The delegation started its tour in the USA where they met officials from the Vice-President's office.

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## **The Hague City Council is concerned about Salafist activities**

By Hans Noot, *HRWF board member*

HRWF (19.05.2018)  
– <https://bit.ly/2IVbsLK> and <https://bit.ly/2Gy97kL> – A majority of the City Council of the Hague, the Netherlands, wants to discontinue the annual average €10.000 subsidy for volunteer activities of the Salafist As Soennah Mosque. According to the mayor of The Hague, Major Pauline Krikke, the mosque will no longer qualify for subsidies from the City as it has come under scrutiny after it was revealed that the mosque received financial support to the tune of more

than [130.000 Kuwait Dinar](#) (more than € 350.000) from *Al Najat*, a Kuwait charity organization that supports jihadists in Syria. According to a documentary of the Dutch media producers *Nieuwsuur*, the mosque also [received funds](#) from the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS)\*. The Dutch Intelligence Agency (AIVD) had warned the City council of these financial transactions. Members of the mosque council were also recorded expressing pro-jihadi sentiments and advising female genital mutilation.

The mosque was mentioned [in the Dutch media](#) several times during this past year when one imam, Fawaz Jneid, was alleged to have called the Rotterdam Major, Ahmed Aboutaleb, an apostate Muslim, in addition to preaching against homosexuals, and cursing both film maker Theo van Gogh and Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. There is currently a restraining order against Jneid for the region around the As Soennah Mosque in The Hague.

Since Jneid's departure from the mosque, tolerance is preached openly. New allegations, however, suggest that behind closed doors, opinions and practices are contradictory.

The As Soennah Mosque is the most influential Muslim centre in the Netherlands.

(\*) The Revival of Islamic Heritage Society was listed on **11 January 2002** pursuant to paragraph 8 (c) of resolution 1333 (2000) as being associated with Al-Qaida, Usama bin Laden or the Taliban for "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf or in support of", "supplying, selling or transferring arms and related materiel to" or "otherwise supporting acts or activities of" Usama bin Laden, Al-Qaida (QDe.004) and the Taliban.

*Source: UN Security Council Committee:*

[https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/entity/revival-of-islamic-heritage-society](https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/revival-of-islamic-heritage-society)

(\*\*) See more information in NL Times: <https://nltimes.nl/2018/03/26/rotterdam-mayor-called-enemy-islam-controversial-imam>

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## **SOUTH KOREA: Decriminalize abortion**

*Court case could end risk of prison, recognize women's rights*

Human Rights Watch (23.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2s1HzzM> – Criminalization of abortion is incompatible with South Korea's human rights obligations, Human Rights Watch said today in an amicus brief to the Constitutional Court of Korea. The court will hear a case on May 24, 2018, involving the country's laws on abortion. The court should decriminalize abortion, and authorities should ensure that safe and legal abortion is accessible.

South Korea's laws provide that procuring or providing an abortion in most circumstances is a crime. A woman who

undergoes an abortion risks a prison sentence of up to a year or a fine of up to 2 million won (US\$1,850). Healthcare workers who provide abortions can face up to two years in prison, though there are exceptions in cases of rape or incest if the pregnancy is between blood relatives who cannot marry legally, if continuing the pregnancy is likely to jeopardize the woman's health, or if the woman or her spouse has certain hereditary or communicable diseases. Married women must have their spouse's permission for an abortion.

"South Korean women are being denied reproductive choices that should be their right," said Liesl Gertholtz, women's rights director. "South Korea should remove all penalties for women who seek an abortion and their medical providers, and ensure access to safe, legal abortion."

International human rights treaties require governments to respect women's reproductive and other human rights. Authoritative interpretations of these treaties by United Nations experts have said that governments should eliminate criminal penalties for abortion and take steps to ensure that legal abortion is accessible. The experts also have said that other barriers to abortion should be removed, including requirements for spousal consent.

The criminalization of abortion in South Korea negatively affects many human rights, Human Rights Watch said. The amicus brief to the Constitutional Court analyzes its impact on women's rights to life, health, nondiscrimination and equality, privacy, information, and freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, as well as the right to decide the number and spacing of their children.

UN human rights bodies and experts have criticized South Korea's punitive restrictions on abortion and have urged the government to modify these laws. In December 2017, a report by the UN working group on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of human rights conditions for South Korea said that it should "[r]espect reproductive rights of women, which include decriminalization of abortions" and "[r]emove all penalties for women who seek abortion, and for doctors and other medical personnel involved in providing these services."

In March 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women urged South Korea to "legalize abortion in cases of rape, incest, threats to the life and/or health of the pregnant woman, or severe fetal impairment, and to decriminalize it in all other cases, remove punitive measures for women who undergo abortion, and provide women with access to quality post-abortion care, especially in cases of complications resulting from unsafe abortions." The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) made similar recommendations in 2017, as did the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 2012.

Unsafe abortions pose a grave threat to the health of women and girls. According to a 2017 report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Guttmacher Institute, 25 million unsafe abortions occurred every year between 2010 and 2014. The WHO has noted that the removal of restrictions on abortion results in reduction of maternal mortality.

"South Korea's Constitutional Court should protect women's health and safety by ruling in accordance with international



law,” Gertholtz said. “Decisions about abortion belong to a pregnant woman, without penalty or interference by the government or anyone else.”

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## **Saudi Arabia: Rights groups: Three more activists arrested in Saudi crackdown**

*The activists, mostly women who advocated for equal right, were smeared by state-linked media as traitors.*

Al Jazeera (22.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2IHnCon> – Saudi authorities have arrested at least three more women’s rights activists, widening a crackdown on campaigners a month before the kingdom lifts its ban on female drives, according to human rights groups.

The government on Saturday announced the arrest of seven people, identified by rights groups mostly as women who have long campaigned for the right to drive and to end the kingdom's male guardianship system.

On Tuesday, Amnesty International told news agencies that the number of people detained had risen to 10, including at least seven women. Human Rights Watch (HRW) confirmed that total.

"Despite international outcry and calls for the release of these activists, they still remain detained for their peaceful human rights work," said Samah Hadid, Amnesty International's Middle East director of campaigns.

"Saudi Arabian authorities cannot continue to publicly state they are dedicated to reform while treating women's rights campaigners in this cruel way."

There was no immediate comment by Saudi government officials.

### ***Male guardianship***

The Saudi government has previously said that those arrested had suspicious contacts with foreign entities and had offered financial support to "enemies overseas". It added that it would identify others involved.

State-linked media have circulated the names of those imprisoned, publicly labelling them as traitors and “agents of embassies”.

The arrests took place just a few weeks before the driving ban is to be lifted on June 24, as promised by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The 32-year-old prince had earlier in the year embarked on an extensive trip in Europe and the United States, painting a picture of a reformist Saudi Arabia that would relax some of its conservative laws as part of his Vision 2030 plan.

The country’s 32-year-old crown prince has widely been credited with being behind the kingdom’s lifting of the driving ban, part of a wider set of reforms being implemented for the Vision 2030 plan.

However, the country’s guardianship system remains in place, under which a male family member – usually the father, husband or brother – must grant permission for a woman’s study, travel and other activities.

Saudi activists claim that the guardianship issue is at the core of the fight for women’s rights.

According to HRW, nearly 30 activists and dissidents have been convicted in Saudi courts since 2011, many of whom received sentences of up to 15 years.

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## **SUDAN: Pressure mounts on Sudan to pardon teen bride for killing 'rapist' husband**

By Nita Bhalla

Thomas Reuters Foundation (14.05.2018) – <https://reut.rs/2IDa2WU> – The United Nations and international rights groups have called on Sudan to pardon a 19-year-old girl sentenced to death after she killed her husband as he tried to rape her, saying that she is a victim of child marriage and acted in self-defense.

Noura Hussein is facing death by hanging after a Sharia court,

which follows Islamic religious laws, found her guilty of premeditated murder for stabbing her husband as he raped her in April. On Thursday, the court sentenced her to death.

The UN Women, UN Population Fund and UN Office of the Special Advisor on Africa on Sunday appealed to President Omar Hassan al-Bashir's government for clemency for Hussein.

"Reports indicate that she was forced against her will into marriage at the age of 16. She was raped by her husband while his three male relatives held her down," said a joint statement.

"Speaking as the voices of women and girls of the world, we plead with the government of Sudan to save the life of Hussein."

Noura Hussein said her father made her contractually marry her cousin when she was 16, but she refused to accept and sought refuge with a relative for three years.

She returned to her family home on the outskirts of the capital Khartoum in April this year after her father said the marriage was canceled, but found that she had been duped and preparations for her wedding ceremony were under way.

Hussein said she refused to have sex with her husband after the ceremony, but on the sixth day, he raped her as three of his male relatives restrained her.

The following day, he attempted to rape her again and as she struggled to stop him, she stabbed him, killing him.

Campaigners said Hussein sought help from her family, but fearing reprisals from her dead husband's relatives, her father handed her over to the police.

Hussein's lawyers said they are preparing to appeal against the court's decision and have until May 25 to do so.

The case has attracted international attention. Social media users on Twitter and Facebook are sharing her story under the hashtag #JusticeForNoura, and a petition on change.org has attracted almost 300,000 signatures.

Amnesty International has started a campaign asking people to appeal to Sudan's Minister of Justice Idris Ibrahim Jamil.

"The courts are saying Noura is guilty of premeditated murder – even though she was defending herself from being raped by a man she was forced to marry when she was just a young teenager," said Amnesty International in a statement.

Sudan is ranked 165 out of 188 countries on the U.N.'s Gender Inequality Index, which measures how women fare compared to men when it comes to access to health, education, political participation and employment opportunities.

UN Women says violence against women and girls is prevalent in Sudan. Marital rape and child marriage are not considered crimes in the predominately Muslim African nation.

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## **ECtHR: Bektashi Community and Others v. FYROM**

*(nos. 48044/10, 75722/12, and 25176/13)*

ECtHR Registrar Press Release (12.04.2017) – The applicants are the Bektashi Community, a religious association, and two of its members, Mr E. Brahimaj, an Albanian national, and Mr A. Sulejmani, a Macedonian national. They both live in ‘the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’, in Tetovo and

Gostivar. Mr E. Brahimaj holds the highest position in the hierarchy of the community.

The case concerned their complaint that, when new legislation entered into force in 2007, the domestic courts had refused to allow the association to retain its status as a religious organization and to accept its fresh application for registration.

The applicant association operated as an officially recognised religious organisation from 1993.

When new legislation on the legal status of churches, religious communities and groups entered into force in 2007, the association requested that the registration court recognise its continuing legal status. Its request was however refused on a formal ground, namely it had not been registered prior to 1998, but only listed in 2000. It then made a fresh application for registration under the new legislation, but in 2010 this request was also refused, mainly because the courts found that its name and doctrinal sources were identical to those of another already registered religious organization and that this could create confusion among believers.

Relying in particular on Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience, and religion) and Article 11 (freedom of assembly and association) of the European Convention, the applicants complained about the domestic courts' decisions refusing to recognise the association as a religious organization or to register it anew.

**Violation of Article 11 read in the light of Article 9 – in**



respect of the applicant association

**Just satisfaction:** 5,000 euros (EUR) (non-pecuniary damage) and EUR 2,000 (costs and expenses) to the applicant association.

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## **NEPAL: Christians in Nepal suspect Hindu extremists in sudden attacks on churches**

Morning Star News (21.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2J3oxmu> – Christians in Nepal are alarmed after this month's sudden series of arson and bomb attacks on four church buildings, and church leaders suspect authorities are lax in investigating.

At the same time, six Christians were arrested for evangelizing while suspected Hindu extremists launched attacks on three church buildings and bombed another. The attacks caused extensive property damage but no casualties.

The Hebron Church building in the eastern hilly region was set on fire on May 9, Emmanuel Church's building in western Nepal's Doti District was burned on May 10, and the Kanchanpur Emmanuel Church building in the midwest hilly region was set ablaze on May 11. Before midnight on May 12, the Mahima Church building in Dhangadhi, in western Nepal, was bombed.

Neither government officials nor police have issued a formal statement on suspects, though police have attributed the attacks to the Nepal Communist Party, known as the Biplab Group. But Christian leaders in Nepal suspect a coordinated campaign by Hindu extremists.

Police are cooperating with church leaders and taking their complaints, but officers have not made any arrests, Tanka Subedi, chair of the Religious Liberty Forum Nepal (RLFN), told Morning Star News. He suspects officials have told police to proceed slowly.

"They have not made any arrests yet, as it seems that they have been clearly notified to not carry out arrests in these cases," Subedi said.

The Mahima Church building in Dhangadhi was partially damaged around 11 p.m. on May 12 after an unknown assailant hurled a

bomb into it after others broke a window. Doors, furniture, carpeting, electric appliances, the roof and windows were reported damaged.

Mahima Church pastor Birendra Kariya told Morning Star News he has faced no threats since he began leading the church in 1999. Police promised that they will investigate, but church leaders have received no response from officers about the cases, Pastor Kariya said.

Pastor B.P. Khanal of The Lord's Assembly told Morning Star News the similarity of the attacks indicated they were coordinated by a single entity.

"Though it might appear that these attacks have been carried out by the same person, geographically this is not possible," he said. "Which means that these are performed by people who are in a network and are well connected to each other."

### ***Online Anti-Christian Movement***

Recently a social media movement has arisen against Christians on Facebook and Twitter with such hashtags as "Hindu Awakening against Conversion (Esai Karan ke Virudh Hindu Jagaran Abhiyaan)," openly threatening killing and attacks, Pastor Khanal said.

"They have gathered a lot of support and fan-following from the Nepali masses," he said. "These attacks have not come upon

the Nepali churches as a surprise, but these are well-planned and coordinated attacks against the Christian community, and the government is doing nothing about this.”

In Panchthar in the eastern hilly region, Pastor Hasta Lova Limbu of the Hebron church said there was no one in the building when it was set on fire at night. Furniture, the pulpit and the carpet were charred. A youth conference concluded a day before the May 9 attack, said Subedi of the RLFN.

Pastor Shyam Thapa of Emmanuel Church said he was in his house, constructed at the back of the church building, when it was set ablaze at 10 p.m. When he detected it, he and area police doused it after flames damaged furniture and electrical circuits.

Pastor Dharendra Rana, 34, who has been leading Kanchanpur Emmanuel Church for 10 years, said the building suffered huge property losses.

“The miscreants broke the lock of the church and formed a heap of all the stuff present in the building, including the records of the church, 300 kilograms of grain and electric appliances, and they set everything ablaze,” Pastor Rana said.

He lives less than a mile from the church building, and on the morning of May 12 he found it completely burned. A church member normally sleeps at the church building to guard it, but on that night he was away at a wedding, the pastor said.

The church has not been able to meet for worship, he added.

“I reported the matter to the local police, but I have not heard anything back from them since then,” Pastor Rana said.

Pastor Rana and Pastor Kariya said they suspect the attacks were carried out by “religiously intolerant Hindus” in order to form a “Hindu Nation.”

The pastors shared this view even though they had not spoken to one another. Christian leaders also shared the view that the sudden rise in attacks against Christians is in one way or another influenced by the recent rise of anti-Christian policies and hostilities in India.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Nepal on May 11 and 12.

Subedi of the RLFN said Christian leaders have appealed for help from the government.

“We have written to the Nepalese government to help us rebuild our churches and asked them to not discriminate us on the basis of religion,” he told Morning Star News. “We look towards them as our guardians and not as our enemy.”

## ***Christians Arrested***

At the same time, six Christians are under police custody in Tehrathum District, eastern Nepal, under allegations of evangelizing.

On May 9 two of them were arrested while singing worship songs on the street and allegedly proclaiming Christ, while four were arrested at their homes, Subedi said. They appeared in court on Thursday (May 17), when their remand to jail was extended for seven more days.

Arrested were Dinesh Subba, 28, Ashish Subba, 22, Dipak Subba, 28, Manatula Dhital, 44, all from Jhapa. Also arrested were two visiting from India – 40-year-old Barshiya Dhital of Sikkim, and Pawan Rai, 33, from Paschim Bangal.

Evangelizing is prohibited under Nepal's new constitution, passed in September 2015, as it was under the previous constitution. While the new constitution establishes Nepal as a secular and democratic republic, its definition of "secular" appears to protect Hinduism and allows others only to worship in their own faiths. Article 26 forbids anyone to "convert a person of one religion to another religion, or disturb the religion of other people."

While evangelizing has long been illegal in Nepal, advocacy groups have recently detected increased enforcement and other anti-Christian efforts as officials seek to placate Hindus incensed that the new constitution did not re-establish a more

prominent place for Hinduism.

A landlocked country between the giants of India and China, Nepal is said to be more than 75 percent Hindu and 16 percent Buddhist. Christians are estimated to make up nearly 3 percent of Nepal's population, and Muslims 4.4 percent.

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## **Mauritania passes law mandating death penalty for “blasphemy”**

Patheos (17.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2KLCfro> – Mauritania has long been one of the worst countries in the world for freethinkers. Those guilty of “blasphemy” have been threatened with the death penalty, which is disturbing on its own but even more so when you realize how blasphemy is always in the

eye of the beholder.

But now that punishment will become mandatory.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union reports:

*The National Assembly passed a law on April 27, 2018 that replaces article 306 of the Criminal Code and makes death penalty mandatory for anyone convicted of “blasphemous speech” and acts deemed “sacrilegious”. The new law eliminates the possibility under article 306 of substituting prison terms for the death penalty for certain apostasy-related crimes if the offender promptly repents. The law also extends the scope of application of the death penalty to “renegade acts.”*

*The law also provides for a sentence of up to two years in prison and a fine of up to 600,000 Ouguiyas (approximately EUR 13,804) for “offending public indecency and Islamic values” and for “breaching Allah’s prohibitions” or assisting in their breach.*

That law has prompted a coalition of groups to urge officials there to reverse the law immediately. They also referenced a blogger accused of blasphemy who has been sentenced to death, had his conviction overturned, but still remains in police custody.



*Mauritanian authorities should reverse the recent adoption of a law on apostasy related crimes making the death penalty mandatory for “blasphemous speech” and “sacrilegious acts”, 21 national and international non-governmental organizations said today. The authorities should also end the arbitrary detention and guarantee the safety of a blogger, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir, whose case appears to be related to the timing of the law. Mkhaitir was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death in December 2014 before a court reduced his punishment to two years imprisonment. Although his sentence has expired, the authorities continue to detain him.*

There’s no reason to believe Mauritania will flip on this issue. But their passage of this bill sends an important message to tourists or non-Muslims who may want to visit the western African nation: Don’t go. It’s not safe.

Visiting Mauritania is now a death trap for anyone with a single critical thought about Islam.

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# GERMANY: Berlin court bars Muslim teacher from wearing headscarf

BBC News (09.05.2018) – <https://bbc.in/2x10CgJ> – A Muslim primary school teacher has lost her bid to overturn a law banning the wearing of religious clothing by public servants in Berlin.

The Berlin labour court judge ruled that the city-state's neutrality law for teachers, police and court officials was constitutional.

Germany's 16 states have differing laws on headscarves in schools.

Three years ago Germany's constitutional court overturned a blanket ban on teachers wearing them.

The federal court cited religious freedom, although civil servants across Germany are barred from covering their faces. The full face-veil is not allowed on a national level but the hijab is.

***Germany's patchwork laws on headscarves***

Since the 2015 federal ruling each state has devised its own rules for Muslim teachers.

The teacher in Berlin worked at the primary school for only a day before being assigned to a college where she was allowed to wear the headscarf.

And the headscarf issue has become controversial in several German states.

Police were called in recently when a head teacher at a primary school in the state of Hesse provoked a storm of abuse. She had written to parents telling them that wearing headscarves and other coverings was not allowed in the classroom.

In Bremen, in the north west, teachers are allowed to wear headscarves, while in North Rhine-Westphalia the issue is decided on a case-by-case basis. The western state is proposing a ban on girls under 14 wearing headscarves in schools.

The Berlin case has prompted widespread reaction in the German capital.

Wednesday's ruling has been welcomed by the founder of Berlin's liberal mosque, Seyran Ates, who has campaigned to keep religious symbols out of schools.

But Zeynep Cetin of the Network Against Discrimination and Islamophobia argued that the ruling was like a professional ban on the female teacher involved.

Berlin Mayor Michael Müller has expressed his support for Berlin's neutrality law but a Green party politician said he wanted it changed.

A Muslim teacher won a separate case in Berlin last year, when the same labour court ruled that a school had broken anti-discrimination laws by refusing her a job. The school had been unable to prove that the headscarf was a "threat to peace at the school".

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