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Algerian converts denied Christian funerals

World Watch Monitor (04.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fKoyhv> - When someone close to us dies, emotions are difficult enough...imagine if then, on top, you couldn't 'say goodbye' in the way that would honour them and bring comfort to the grieving.

That is the situation for many Christians when they are a minority in their own country.

When 70-year-old Amar died last week [30 Oct] after a week in an Algerian hospital, his children gathered to mourn and discussed funeral arrangements with one of their church's pastors.

The family, from a village outside the northern city of Tizi-Ouzou, the main city in the Kabylie region, decided to give him a Christian funeral.

Two of his sons and one of his daughters had, like their father, become Christians and been baptised in a local church. A high number of conversions has been recorded in Tizi-Ouzou despite Algerian Christians complaining of systematic discrimination.

The Kabylie region is home to most of members of the tiny, but fast-growing Christian minority in Algeria, with more than 20 churches of the 43 affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), the largest 'umbrella' grouping of Christians in the country.

So Amar's family decided against the Islamic death rites. Usually a vigil takes place in the home of the dead person. People gather to sing and mourn all night, appealing to Allah and Muhammad to welcome their loved one (whose body should also be washed while religious songs are sung) into paradise.

Although Amar's family had decided to break from Islamic traditions, they still wanted their father's body to be washed, and a number of Christians volunteered to do so.

The next day, the day of the funeral, the village imam and some of his acolytes, along with an older member of the community, visited the family. The imam threatened ostracism from the rest of the village if they did not reverse their decision, and urged the villagers to put pressure on the family.

The imam said: "We are Muslims, and we will remain so. The funeral of our dead will be as it always was, and we will not compromise our customs and religion. If someone wants to bury his dead in our cemetery, he should do it according to our traditions."

Amid rising tensions with neighbours, the Christian group backed down, and Amar was buried according to Islamic customs. Some fellow-Christians sought to comfort members of his family who had adopted their father's new faith, saying: "Our brother Amar is already in the arms of his Father."

This incident is not a one-off. In many Algerian communities, relatives' efforts to secure a Christian burial have become a source of conflict with local Muslims. Christians complain that the authorities' refusal to intervene in such disputes is discrimination against them.

Christians welcomed the passage in February of a new Constitution that recognised freedom of worship "within the boundaries of law". But there have already been instances in which authorities have continued to apply the 2006 law which strictly regulates non-Muslim worship and have ordered the closure of a church.

Two months ago the EPA asked the UN to urge the Algerian authorities to grant greater rights and freedoms to the country's Christian minority. The group said that they wanted a law banning them from evangelism repealed, and the prohibition on marrying non-Muslim foreigners lifted.

Algeria is 37th of the 50 most difficult countries in which to live as a Christian, according to the World Watch List produced by Open Doors International, which works with Christians worldwide under pressure for their faith.

UPDATE: Family seek presidential pardon for Algerian Christian

World Watch Monitor (19.10.2016) - The family of imprisoned Algerian Christian Slimane Bouhafis has appealed to the Algerian President for a pardon, after he was convicted of "insulting Islam and the prophet Mohammed" in posts he made on social media.

Bouhafis, who converted to Christianity in 1997, was sentenced to three years imprisonment on 6 September.

During a press conference hosted by the Algerian League of Human Rights (LADDH), in the city of Béjaïa in the Kabylie region, Bouhafis' daughter, Thilleli, said: "We have decided to seek a presidential pardon, instead of appealing to the Supreme Court. This is our last resort and the only possible solution to set my father free."

She added that the family rejects the verdict of the judge.

Bouhafis could have opted for an appeal to the Supreme Court, but an LADDH spokesman ruled out this option because it "would take much time", while Bouhafis is said to be suffering ill health.

"My father is in a critical condition because of his illness. He suffers from inflammatory rheumatism, and needs a specific diet which is impossible to get in prison. He drinks only coffee and has lost a lot of weight in this short time since his detention," said Thilleli Bouhafis.

She stressed that her father had only shared someone else's posts on Facebook, adding: "I wonder why there is this rage against my father, who did not have a high profile on Facebook."

According to LADDH vice-president Said Salhi, the verdict "is part of an escalation" and is a result of "abusive" use of article 144 (bis) of the Algerian law. He called for a change of

this legislation and criticised “the policy of double standards” in Algerian justice, citing various cases of arrests of non-fasters during Ramadan in recent years. Some were soon released, under pressure from local communities, while others – who didn’t have this support in their respective regions – were brought to court and ended up in jail.

Kabylie is the Berber region in Algeria, where the church has grown significantly in recent decades. Bouhaf’s conviction could be seen as a means of silencing him because of his political activism. He belongs to a movement seeking the self-determination of Kabylie (known as MAK), a group not tolerated by the authorities. MAK activists are regularly harassed and arrested. Mainly populated by Berbers – while the rest of Algeria is predominantly Arab – the Kabylie region has always had a tumultuous relationship with the central government in Algiers.

Previous update (7 Sept):

After an appeal, Algerian Christian Slimane Bouhaf has had his five-year jail sentence for committing blasphemy against Islam and its prophet on social media reduced to three years. A fine of 100,000 dinars (US\$900) was also dropped.

Bouhaf, 49, had appealed against the five-year sentence, which was the maximum possible punishment he could have faced, saying he had only spoken out against radical Islam and terrorism.

The Algerian League for Human Rights (LADDH), working on behalf of Bouhaf and the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), called the decision to keep Bouhaf in jail “amazing and offensive” and said it will now take his case to the Supreme Court.

“Although the sentence has been reduced, LADDH considers imprisonment for this accusations a serious precedent and this is inconsistent with the Constitution and the universal declaration of human rights,” wrote Saïd Salhi, LADDH vice president, in a statement.

Salhi added that his organisation “will continue to follow and explore all ways and legal means to free Bouhaf, especially because his health condition doesn’t allow him stay there; this imprisonment is putting his life in danger”.

Original article (9 Aug.):

A Christian in Algeria has been sentenced to five years in prison – the maximum term – and given a heavy fine for blasphemy against Islam and its prophet, for a social media post.

Slimane Bouhaf, 49, appeared before a judge on 7 Aug in the eastern town of Setif (300km from Algiers, the capital) in the Kabylie region.

He was arrested on 31 July for posting a message on social media about the light of Jesus overcoming the “lie” of Islam and its prophet. He also published photos showing the execution of a civilian by an Islamist terrorist.

Such material is judged by the authorities to insult Islam, the state religion in Algeria, according to its Constitution. The penal code provides for a penalty of three to five years in prison, along with a heavy fine, against anyone convicted of insulting Islam and Muhammad, its prophet.

The Vice-President of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), Saïd Salhi, denounced what he called “this attack” on the guarantees of freedom of conscience and worship enshrined in Algeria’s Constitution.

The human rights group said it wished to “alert public opinion and defenders of liberties to this new attack against the rights guaranteed by national laws and the international instruments of human rights”. LADDH also called for Bouhaf’s unconditional release and for “a broad mobilization to push back an unlawful act, to let justice triumph”.

The news of his sentence was a shock for his family, who denounced what they called a “sham” trial of the man who became a Christian in 1997, and who was baptised in 2006. His daughter, Afaf, described her father as a man who has always defended the interests of his country from a young age. She said he is known for his commitment to democracy and religious freedom in all his writings published on his Facebook page.

Bouhaf’s family said they are deeply concerned, as he suffers from a chronic illness and his health may deteriorate as he goes to prison. According to his daughter, he suffers from inflammatory rheumatism, a disease that worsens under stress. “He needs to follow a special diet,” she said.

The President of the Protestant Church of Algeria says its lawyer will appeal the verdict.

Religion and identity claims

Bouhaf’s maximum sentence was “severe in view of a rather minor offence”, a source who preferred to remain anonymous told World Watch Monitor. Such comments on social media are common in Algeria without usually triggering the wrath of the authorities, the source added.

The heavy sentence could also be seen as a means of silencing Bouhaf because of his political activism. He belongs to a movement for the self-determination of Kabylie (known as MAK), a separatist group not tolerated by the authorities. MAK activists are regularly harassed and even arrested.

Kabylie, home to most of Algeria’s tiny but fast-growing Christian minority, is a vast region – similar in size to Denmark – in the north-east of Algeria, on the edge of the Mediterranean. It comprises the provinces of Tizi-Ouzou and Béjaïa, among others.

Kabylie is considered a “recalcitrant” region, where a strong sense of regional identity and resistance to all forms of central control have developed over the years. Mainly populated by Berbers – while the rest of Algeria is predominantly populated by Arabs – the region has always had a tumultuous relationship with the central government in Algiers.

Kabylie’s landscape of forests and mountainous terrain, riddled with caves, has provided a fertile ground for guerrillas. On 24 September, 2014, a French tourist, [Hervé Gourdel](#), was assassinated in Kabylie by a radical Islamist group, Soldiers of the Caliphate, which has pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State.

Kabylie used to be a refuge for fighters during the Algerian War of Independence against the French colonialists. In the 1990s, at the heart of the Algerian Civil War, the area then became a hideout for combatants from the Armed Islamic Group, which later mutated into Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), responsible for the kidnap of several Western nationals in Sub-Saharan Africa. AQIM was strongly involved in the occupation in 2012 of northern Mali, along much of Algeria’s southern border.

The Algerian army, which regularly carries out searches in Kabylie, has never been able to completely eradicate terrorism and banditry in the region.

Non-Muslim minorities in Algeria

Submission of HRWF Int'l to the EEAS consultation of NGOs

HRWF (15.09.2016) - On the occasion of the European External Action Service (EEAS) consultation of NGOs on the partnership priorities EU-Algeria on 15 September, Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l is urging the European Union to raise a number of issues concerning Christian minorities in Algeria.

Sunni Muslims compose more than 99 percent of the estimated 34.8 million people in Algeria. Christians compose a majority of the remaining one percent. There are varying estimates of the number of Christians and Jewish citizens in Algeria, between 12,000 and 50,000 people. These non-Islamic religious minorities are subject to institutional and societal discrimination.

The Algerian constitution provides that the "freedom of *creed* and opinion is inviolable," which insufficiently protects freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by Article 18 of the ICCPR. The constitution also declares Islam as the state religion and prohibits state institutions from engaging in behavior incompatible with Islamic values. It further prohibits non-Muslims from running for the presidency but non-Muslims may hold other public offices and work within the government.

In 2006, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika issued **Ordinance 06-03**, which regulates non-Muslim religious worship.

Freedom to share one's beliefs

Ordinance 06-03 forbids attempting to proselytize Muslims or even to shake the faith of a Muslim.

Proselytism carries heavy punishments; lay persons can receive one to three years in jail and fines up to 500,000 dinars; religious leaders can receive three to five years in prison and may be fined up to one million dinars. Further, conduct that incites, constrains, or seduces with a tendency to convert a Muslim, or using —education, health, social, culture, training . . . or any financial means to convert a Muslim is punishable by five years in jail and fines up to 500,000 dinars. However, there is no legislation banning Muslim proselytism of non-Muslims.

Ordinance 06-03 forbids printing, storing, or distributing materials for converting Muslims. It carries heavy penalties of up to five years in jail and up to one million Algerian dinars.

The Ministries of Religious Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Commerce must approve the importation of non-Islamic religious writings. Citizens and foreigners may legally import personal copies of non-Islamic religious texts.

Freedom of association and assembly

Ordinance 06-03 forbids

- any religious activity of a religious group if it is not registered and recognized by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Religious Affairs;
- the use of a place of worship if it is not registered.

Generally, all requests to register non-Muslim associations are deferred. In 2010, only one application for registration by a Jewish community was approved. In July 2014, Religious Affairs Minister Mohamed Aissa announced that Algeria intends to reopen

synagogues that were shuttered in the 1990s for security reasons but added that “for the moment the state does not plan to do this right away because the security of the worshippers could not be guaranteed.”

Christian leaders reported difficulties in registering due either to government officials’ ignorance of the process or their plain refusal, even if they had knowledge of an administrative procedure.

Ordinance 06-03, together with other penal code provisions, allows the government to shut down any unapproved religious service, even in private homes.

Executive Decree 07-135 forbids observing non-Muslim religious events if a request for permission has not been submitted to the relevant *wali* (governor) at least five days before the event and approved by him, and the event must occur in buildings accessible to the public.

In January 2012, a law on freedom of association was passed that arbitrarily restricts the right to freedom of association and elevated it *de facto* to a criminal offense, in violation of state obligations prescribed by international human rights law.

The Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) is among a number of religious organisations concerned about the new law.

The law stipulates that an association must be present in at least 12 regions (out of a total of 48) across the country in order to be granted national status. Previously the EPA in Algeria was present in only five regions, so it was obliged to obtain the affiliation of other churches located across seven additional regions in order to comply.

Under the provisions of the new law, the Ministry of Interior will either issue a receipt of approval or a decision of refusal within 60 days.

The law also prohibits religious associations from receiving funding from political parties or foreign entities.

The European Union then expressed its concern, “We hope that these practical difficulties in the implementation of this law, which are not quite the same for all associations, will be lifted to facilitate the work of associations,” said the head of the EU delegation of Algeria, Marek Skolil, during a press conference on December 22, 2014 in Algiers.

A church closed in 2016

On Sunday 24 April 2016, a church in Mâatkas in Algeria’s north eastern Kabylie region was ordered to stop all religious activities. Algerian Churches, many of which primarily consist of Christians from a Muslim background, have come under increasing pressure in recent years. In 2010, Islamists burnt down a Pentecostal church in Mâatkas.

The closure of the church may in part be a response to significant church growth that has been happening in recent years, particularly in the Kabylie region. The people of this area are predominantly Berbers, a non-Arab ethnic group which had a significant Christian presence prior to the advent of Islam. In fact, north eastern Algeria is where Augustine of Hippo was bishop in the early fifth century.

Blasphemy Laws

Article 144 of the Algerian penal code criminalizes insults against Islam or Muhammad and provides that anyone who insult[s] the prophet and any of the messengers of God, or denigrat[es] the creed and precepts of Islam, whether by writing,

drawing, declaration, or any other means may be imprisoned for up to five years and fined 50,000 to 100,000 dinars.

Offending the creed of Islam or its prophets is a criminal offense, as is insulting any religion.

Because the language of the statute is not precise, it is open to interpretation and manipulation by police and judicial officials. Algerian citizens have been arrested for eating in public during Ramadan, which was deemed to violate the sanctity of Ramadan. There is no law that specifically prohibits eating during Ramadan but in 2010 non-Muslims having lunch on a private construction site during Ramadan were arrested for "insulting Islam." They were finally acquitted but declared not welcome as Christians in Algeria.

Blasphemy: A Christian sentenced to three years in prison in 2016

In early September 2016, Algerian Christian Slimane Bouhafs had his five-year jail sentence for committing blasphemy against Islam and its prophet on social media reduced on appeal to three years. A fine of 100,000 dinars (US\$900) was also dropped. He had been arrested on 31 July for posting a message on social media about the light of Jesus overcoming the "lie" of Islam and its prophet. He also published photos showing the execution of a civilian by an Islamist terrorist.



Algerian Christian Slimane Bouhafs sentenced to 3 years in prison for alleged blasphemy

Bouhafs, 49, had appealed against the five-year sentence, which was the maximum possible punishment he could have faced, saying he had only spoken out against radical Islam and terrorism.

The Algerian League for Human Rights (LADDH), working on behalf of Bouhafs and the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), called the decision to keep Bouhafs in jail "amazing and offensive" and said it will now take his case to the Supreme Court.

Family code

The family code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam. The code does not prohibit Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women, provided the woman belongs to a religion included under the term "people of the book" (Christian or Jewish).

Under the law, children born to a Muslim father are considered Muslim regardless of the mother's religion.

Recommendations

***Human Rights Without Frontiers* recommends that the Algerian government allow Christians**

- to import, print, and distribute publications about their religious denomination;
- to share their beliefs with Muslims;
- to meet freely in public or private regardless whether their community is registered or not;
- to open places of worship and buildings for religious meetings according to their needs;

And, further, that the government

- repeal the blasphemy laws and release Algerian Christian Slimane Bouhafs who is sentenced to three years in prison for committing blasphemy;
- transform the legislation concerning insults against Islam and/or the Prophet into legislation against hate speech and hate crimes, in line with international standards;
- amend the family code so that men and women can get married without having to recant their faith;
- allow children born from religiously mixed marriages to choose their religious affiliation.

Algerian Christian's blasphemy sentence reduced to three years

World Watch Monitor (07.09.2016) - After an appeal, Algerian Christian Slimane Bouhafs has had his five-year jail sentence for committing blasphemy against Islam and its prophet on social media reduced to three years. A fine of 100,000 dinars (US\$900) was also dropped.

Bouhafs, 49, had appealed against the five-year sentence, which was the maximum possible punishment he could have faced, saying he had only spoken out against radical Islam and terrorism.

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Salhi added that his organisation "will continue to follow and explore all ways and legal means to free Bouhafs, especially because his health condition doesn't allow him stay there; this imprisonment is putting his life in danger".

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Such material is judged by the authorities to insult Islam, the state religion in Algeria, according to its Constitution. The penal code provides for a penalty of three to five years in prison, along with a heavy fine, against anyone convicted of insulting Islam and Muhammad, its prophet.

The Vice-President of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), Said Salhi, denounced what he called “this attack” on the guarantees of freedom of conscience and worship enshrined in Algeria’s Constitution.

The human rights group said it wished to “alert public opinion and defenders of liberties to this new attack against the rights guaranteed by national laws and the international instruments of human rights”. LADDH also called for Bouhafis’ unconditional release and for “a broad mobilization to push back an unlawful act, to let justice triumph”.

The news of his sentence was a shock for his family, who denounced what they called a “sham” trial of the man who became a Christian in 1997, and who was baptised in 2006. His daughter, Afaf, described her father as a man who has always defended the interests of his country from a young age. She said he is known for his commitment to democracy and religious freedom in all his writings published on his Facebook page.

Bouhafis’ family said they are deeply concerned, as he suffers from a chronic illness and his health may deteriorate as he goes to prison. According to his daughter, he suffers from inflammatory rheumatism, a disease that worsens under stress. “He needs to follow a special diet,” she said.

The President of the Protestant Church of Algeria says its lawyer will appeal the verdict.

Religion and identity claims

Bouhafis’ maximum sentence was “severe in view of a rather minor offence”, a source who preferred to remain anonymous told World Watch Monitor. Such comments on social media are common in Algeria without usually triggering the wrath of the authorities, the source added.

The heavy sentence could also be seen as a means of silencing Bouhafis because of his political activism. He belongs to a movement for the self-determination of Kabylie (known as MAK), a separatist group not tolerated by the authorities. MAK activists are regularly harassed and even arrested.

Kabylie, home to most of Algeria’s tiny but fast-growing Christian minority, is a vast region – similar in size to Denmark – in the north-east of Algeria, on the edge of the Mediterranean. It comprises the provinces of Tizi-Ouzou and Béjaïa, among others.

Kabylie is considered a “recalcitrant” region, where a strong sense of regional identity and resistance to all forms of central control have developed over the years. Mainly populated by Berbers – while the rest of Algeria is predominantly populated by Arabs –

the region has always had a tumultuous relationship with the central government in Algiers.

Kabylie's landscape of forests and mountainous terrain, riddled with caves, has provided a fertile ground for guerrillas. On 24 September, 2014, a French tourist, Hervé Gourdel, was assassinated in Kabylie by a radical Islamist group, Soldiers of the Caliphate, which has pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State.

Kabylie used to be a refuge for fighters during the Algerian War of Independence against the French colonialists. In the 1990s, at the heart of the Algerian Civil War, the area then became a hideout for combatants from the Armed Islamic Group, which later mutated into Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), responsible for the kidnap of several Western nationals in Sub-Saharan Africa. AQIM was strongly involved in the occupation in 2012 of northern Mali, along much of Algeria's southern border.

The Algerian army, which regularly carries out searches in Kabylie, has never been able to completely eradicate terrorism and banditry in the region.

Algerian Christian gets maximum sentence for 'blasphemy'



World Watch Monitor (09.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bCZNRk> - A Christian in Algeria has been sentenced to five years in prison – the maximum term – and given a heavy fine for blasphemy against Islam and its prophet, for a social media post. Slimane Bouhafs, 49, appeared before a judge on 7 Aug in the eastern town of Setif (300km from Algiers, the capital) in the Kabylie region.

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The President of the Protestant Church of Algeria says its lawyer will appeal the verdict.

Religion and identity claims

Bouhaf's maximum sentence was "severe in view of a rather minor offence", a source who preferred to remain anonymous told World Watch Monitor. Such comments on social media are common in Algeria without usually triggering the wrath of the authorities, the source added.

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The Algerian army, which regularly carries out searches in Kabylie, has never been able to completely eradicate terrorism and banditry in the region.

Algeria church ordered to stop worship

Barnabas Fund (05.05.16) - <http://bit.ly/1T1Xmov> - On Sunday 24 April a church in Mâatkas in Algeria's north eastern Kabylie region was ordered to stop all religious activities. Algerian Churches, many of which primarily consist of Christians from a Muslim background, have come under increasing pressure in recent years. In 2010 Islamists burnt down a Pentecostal church in Mâatkas.

In 2006 a law was passed that forbade non-Muslims from worshipping anywhere other than in a registered church. It also required them to obtain permission to use a building for worship although church leaders complain that the government has repeatedly failed to grant such requests. This makes Algerian churches vulnerable, as whilst some own church buildings built during the time of French colonial rule, the majority have to rent premises in which to worship.

Although Algeria's new constitution passed in February 2016 guarantees freedom of worship, the 2006 law is still in place and appears to be increasingly used. This is the second attempt so far this year to close down a church in this way.

These actions may in part be a response to significant church growth that has been happening in recent years, particularly in the Kabylie region. The people of this area are predominantly Berbers, a non-Arab ethnic group which had a significant Christian presence prior to the advent of Islam. In fact, north eastern Algeria is where Augustine of Hippo was bishop in the early fifth century.

A church in the Kabylie area threatened with closure

Middle East Concern (03.03.2016) - The church, affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria (L'Église Protestante d'Algérie / EPA), received a letter from the district authorities last week requiring the church to cease all religious activities on the grounds that they are in breach of a 2006 decree which regulates non-Muslim worship. The authorities have threatened to commence legal proceedings against the pastor if Christian worship continues in the building currently being used by the church. The letter provides no further detail about the alleged infringement, nor any timeframe within which steps should be taken to ensure compliance with the law.

This situation reflects a long-standing legal difficulty faced by churches in Algeria. The 2006 decree stipulates that permission must be obtained before using a building for non-Muslim worship, and that such worship can only be conducted in buildings which have been specifically designated for that purpose. In practice, the authorities have failed to respond to almost all applications by churches for places of worship, including by churches affiliated to the EPA which is legally registered. In view of the authorities' failure

to respond to applications, it has become standard practice for churches to rent premises and inform the local authorities that they have done so. The church currently facing legal proceedings inaugurated newly rented premises on 25th December 2015. The church leaders advised the regional authorities about their activities and provided all relevant documentation, including a statement confirming the church's affiliation to the EPA.

In 2011 the mayor of Bejaia, a province in Kabylie, ordered the closure of rented church premises in the local area on the same legal basis. However, as a result of pressure from the EPA and a wave of protest among activists and human rights NGOs, the mayor withdrew this order.
