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Tunisia lifts ban on Muslim women marrying non-Muslims

President's initiative secures Tunisian women's right to choose spouse despite opposition from mainstream Muslim clerics

Al Jazeera (14.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2fpyiLR> - Tunisia has abolished a decades-old ban on Muslim women marrying non-Muslims as the president seeks to secure equal rights for the country's female population.

"Congratulations to the women of Tunisia for the enshrinement of the right to the freedom to choose one's spouse," presidency spokeswoman Saida Garrach wrote on Facebook on Thursday.

The announcement came a month after President Beji Caid Essebsi called for the government to lift the ban dating back to 1973, arguing that existing practice violates Tunisia's constitution, adopted in 2014 in the wake of the Arab Spring revolution.

He created a commission, led by a female lawyer and rights activists, aimed at drafting revised rules.

Until now a non-Muslim man who wished to marry a Muslim Tunisian woman had to convert to Islam and submit a certificate of his conversion as proof while a Muslim Tunisian man is allowed to marry a non-Muslim woman.

Human rights groups in the North African country had campaigned for the ban's abolition, saying it undermined the fundamental human right to choose a spouse.

Inheritance inequality

Tunisia is viewed as being ahead of most Arab countries on women's rights, but there is still discrimination, particularly in matters of inheritance.

Daughters are entitled to only half the inheritance given to sons.

Mainstream Muslim clerics almost universally see the inheritance rules as enshrined in the Quran, Islam's holy book, and consider the rules on marriage to be equally unquestionable in Islamic law.

The country's leading imams and theologians have issued a statement denouncing the president's proposals as a "flagrant violation of the precepts" of Islam.

Some worry that such changes could stir up anger in a country that has already suffered deadly attacks.

The first president of independent Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, championed a landmark social code in 1956 that set a standard for the region by banning polygamy and granting

new rights to women unheard of in the Arab world at the time. But even he didn't dare push for equal inheritance.

Tunisians demand change to Muslim marriage decree

Arab News (27.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2nPfF8R> - An alliance of Tunisian human rights groups on Monday called on authorities to scrap a 1973 decree that bans Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims.

The alliance of some 60 groups signed a statement calling for the decree to be revoked, saying it undermines "a fundamental human right: which is the right to choose a spouse."

Sana Ben Achour, president of the Beity association, told a news conference "it is inadmissible today for a simple decree, which has almost no judicial value... to command the lives of thousands."

The decree issued in 1973 by the justice ministry stipulates that a non-Muslim man who wishes to marry a Tunisia woman must convert to Islam and submit a certificate of his conversion as proof.

Wahid Ferchichi, of the Adli association for the defense of individual liberties, said the decree violates Tunisia's constitution which promotes equality between all citizens, regardless of gender.

The coalition said it would mount a campaign to mobilize public opinion and seek meetings with the ministers of justice, interior and the head of government, hoping the decree will be scrapped by November.

Tunisia is viewed as being ahead of most Arab countries on women's rights.

The North African country and birthplace of Arab Spring protests that ousted several regional autocratic, adopted a new constitution in 2014 which guarantees equality between men and women.

Article 21 of the constitution states: "All citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination."

But discrimination against women in Tunisia remains rife, particularly in matters of inheritance and the country's Code of Personal Status designates the man as the head of a family.