

## **Laïcité and religious freedom: A coalition of NGOs questions France at the United Nations**

CAP/ LC HRWF (15.01.2018) - In a side-event following the Universal Periodic Review of France in Geneva this Monday 15th January, several NGOs and an international law expert have called upon President Emmanuel Macron and his Prime Minister to revise the financing of FECRIS (European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects) and its member organizations. Under the predecessors of President Macron, FECRIS has benefitted from abusive grants that they have used to disseminate hate speech targeting some minority religious groups in the countries of the European Union and beyond.

The representative of the French NGO CAP/LC (Coordination des Associations et des Individus pour la Liberté de Conscience), Mr. Thierry Valle, highlighted the French policy stigmatizing religious minorities and the human consequences which are often dramatic for the members of these minorities. By financing FECRIS, France contributes to the expansion of this phenomenon in Europe.

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, France has to reconsider its policy about religious minorities, he added.

Attorney Patricia Duval, an international law expert, drew attention to the ideological roots of FECRIS.

FECRIS is a French legal association that was created by UNADFI (a French anti-sect organization) in 1994. Its objective is to bring together anti-sect groups across Europe which claim to defend families and individuals against 'harmless sectarian organizations' and to represent them in the EU institutions. Although this goal may look laudable, a deep analysis reveals that FECRIS member associations in France

- call sects any religious minority or spiritual movement the beliefs of which are described by FECRIS as deviant from what is "usually considered a religion",
- view the conversion to such beliefs as a psychological subjection, a 'capture of souls' and a violation of human dignity;
- collect testimonies of families or parents of converts to new religious movements who disagree with their choice to accuse such groups of destroying families,
- compile data based on rumors, prejudices and suspicion that they use to stigmatize the concerned groups,
- have continuously received funding from various French public powers that they use to carry out an ideological crusade.

The lawyer concluded that it was urgent for France to stop sponsoring this sort of activities and indicated that the United Nations Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, after her visit to France on 18 to 29 September 2005 also made specific recommendations in this sense

The representative of Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels), Mr. Willy Fautré, denounced the dangerous liaisons between the (Russian) vice-president of FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, and the most radical circles of the Russian Orthodox Church. Whilst France, a secular country, finances FECRIS, its branch in Russia heavily persecutes non-Orthodox religions and carries out missionary activities aiming at bringing 'back home' Orthodox people who converted to other religions.

FECRIS member association in Russia hereby implements Vladimir Putin's ultranationalist policy which under the guise of "spiritual security" aims at eradicating any religion of foreign origin from the "Russian Orthodox Lands". The ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and

peaceful apolitical Muslim movements as well as the imprisonment of several Scientologists are part of this religious purification strategy.

Alexander Dvorkin, in Russia, enjoys disseminating inflammatory narratives and hate speech about Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Baptists, Adventists, the Salvation Army, Mormons, Falun Gong practitioners and even Hindus. Last year, in the capital city of India, Hindus have held a demonstration outside the Russian embassy to protest against the persecution of their religion and burnt an effigy of Dvorkin.

The representative of the European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom (EIFRF), Mr Eric Roux, declared: "When a country like France adopts a specific but controversial policy, other countries in the world may think that it is therefore legitimate to follow suit and they usually do worse.

By financing groups like FECRIS, France sends the following message to the rest of the world: 'You can discriminate and persecute religious minorities because it is what we, the cradle of human rights, do'.

Under its newly elected government which seems willing to reform society by focusing on real priorities, France should stop financing and supporting such associations

France should apply its principles of laïcité and human rights, protect religious freedom for all, and particularly members of religious minorities.

Version in French of this press release: <http://www.coordiap.com/press3061-Laicite-et-liberte-religieuse-Une-coalition-d-ONGs-interpelle-la-France-a-l-ONU.htm>