

ALGERIA: Jailed Algerian Christian receives partial presidential pardon

A Christian imprisoned for three years for “insulting Islam and the prophet Muhammad” in his social media posts has received a partial presidential pardon.

World Watch Monitor (12.07.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2tPFqXQ> – Slimane Bouhafs, who converted to Christianity from Islam in 1997, was arrested almost a year ago (31 July 2016) for posting a message on social media about the light of Jesus overcoming the “lie” of Islam and its prophet. Such a message was judged by the authorities to insult Islam – the state religion in Algeria, according to its Constitution.

He was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment on 6 September 2016.

But now his sentence has been reduced by 16 months, following a partial pardon granted by Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of Algeria’s independence (5 July).

This pardon means he could be released in nine months from now.

The announcement was made this week by Bouhafs’ daughter Thilleli, after the family was informed of the pardon by the public prosecutor.

According to them, Bouhafs’ good conduct during his incarceration contributed to his pardon.

His family, supported by Algerian and international human-rights groups, have never stopped protesting against the verdict. The Algerian League for Human Rights (LADDH) called

his trial “arbitrary” and the verdict “part of an escalation” against non-Muslims in Algeria.

Aggression because of his faith

According to his daughter, Bouhaf's health has deteriorated significantly since his arrest, exacerbating an existing condition – he suffers from inflammatory rheumatism, which requires a diet that is impossible to ensure in prison.

He reportedly also suffers aggression from his fellow prisoners because of his Christian faith, about which he is open. That is why the family has filed a new request to grant him conditional release for health reasons.

In October 2016, a crowd gathered in the northern city of Tizi Ouzou to lobby for Bouhaf's to be allowed access to medical treatment.

They also called for a change to the law that punishes anyone deemed to have insulted Muhammad or “denigrated the dogma or precepts of Islam”.

The organisers, a civil society group, vowed to continue protests in other regions of the country.

Bouhaf's was first jailed in the northern city of Setif, before being moved another 75 miles east to the city of Constantine, and then to a third prison in the coastal city of Jijel, 300km east of the capital, Algiers. The final transfer took place despite the family's request that he be moved to a prison in Béjaïa, in the Kabylie region where the family is from and where there is a relatively large Christian community.

The civil society group described his transfer as “an arbitrary decision ... to take him further away from his family”.

Bouhaf's also belongs to a movement seeking the self-determination of Kabylie, the Berber region in Algeria; the

group (known as MAK) is not tolerated by the authorities. MAK activists are regularly harassed and arrested.

While the rest of Algeria is predominantly Arab, the Kabylie region (where the Church has grown significantly recently) has always had a tumultuous relationship with the central government in Algiers. It 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.

For many, Bouhaf's conviction was seen as a means of silencing him because of his political activism.

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 Islamic State group.

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).

AQIM and its offshoots are responsible for the kidnap of several Western nationals in sub-Saharan Africa. AQIM was also 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.

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