

# TUNISIA: Women fight for right to marry non-Muslims

*Since September 2017, Tunisian women are free to marry non-muslims*

By Alessandra Bajec

The New Arab (25.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2NZWSGd> – One year after scrapping of a ban on marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim partners, Tunisia experiences resistance at a local level on its path to social change amid a resurgence of conservatism.

Since September 2017, Tunisian women are free to marry non-Muslims. President Beji Caid Essebsi repealed a circular dated to 1973, inspired by the country's Muslim traditions that previously required non-Muslim men to convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim woman. Only then the country's Mufti would allow the marriage to take place.

Despite the change in legislation, the fight over inter-religious marriages is not over yet as many women have recently stumbled on problems when trying to marry outside of Islam.

The case of Zeineb and her Italian fiancé Sergio is very illustrative of this fight. Speaking in her coastal town Hammamet, she told about the bureaucratic battle they fought

after they decided to wed back in June and prepared all the paperwork for the legal procedure.

“The whole problem was that we couldn’t find in Hammamet a notary who was willing to marry us,” Zeineb said recalling the first three notaries she approached who refused to validate the marriage.

Two motivated their rejection saying that allowing such marriage was against their principles, the third said that the municipality did not want to register the marriage contract.

“The law must be respected,” Sergio commented, baffled at the many obstructions they found.

“I’m not Muslim, and I won’t change to please the Mufti. Is it my life or the Mufti’s life?” he questioned in a sarcastic tone, “where’s my personal freedom?”

While some of the reluctant officials declined out of “religious convictions,” others claimed they still had to receive or read through the new regulations on interfaith marriages.

After going around and phoning most notaries of Hammamet, the couple went to Nabeul, a nearby town, and finally managed to have their marriage officiated.

Besides Zeineb and Sergio's case, at least two more mixed marriages were reported only in August by the Tunisian association for minorities.

In the last few months, a show of resistance has emerged among some notaries and municipal councillors who seem to be motivated by religious principles, and dispute that recognising inter-religious marriages runs counter to Islamic law.

The newly elected mayor of Kram, Fathi Laayouni, caused much debate in the middle of the summer after declaring that he would never authorise a marriage in his jurisdiction between a Tunisian woman and a non-Muslim.

When defending his position, the Tunisian mayor referenced to Article 5 of the 1956 Personal Status Code giving an ultra-conservative interpretation of the legislation.

"Article 5 sets out some impediments based on Sharia law, among them the marriage between a Muslim female and a non-Muslim male," he stated, "so we must refer to provisions of Islamic (Sharia) law."

Noting that Article 5 has not been recently revoked, Laayouni maintained that his duty is to make sure the law is duly applied. He argued that in order to avoid misinterpretations of the code, the article should be amended to refer to the "law", not Islamic law.

Alternatively, it should be made clear that the marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim is not listed in the impediments.

The mayor of Kram is convinced that those who oppose his stance are just few people who want to "destroy the Tunisian family and society" in the name of modernity.

“The majority of Tunisians are with me, many town halls are refusing to officiate these mixed marriages without a certificate of conversion to Islam from the male spouse,” he claimed.

Lawyers and politicians have said that Laayouni has breached the law and challenged the state.

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# **Interfaith prayer rally held in Myanmar as religious minorities face violence**

By Kayla Goodson

HRWF (11.10.2017) – Thousands of people gathered in Yangon, Myanmar, for an interfaith prayer ceremony on 10 October,

reports Agence France-Presse. The event was meant to be a show of unity in a country that is overwhelmed by ethnically-charged violence, especially against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State.

The western border area has been in a state of violence since a group of Rohingya militants attacked police posts. Since then, more than half the Rohingya Muslim population has fled their homes, according to AFP.

The violence has affected other religious minorities in the Buddhist-majority country, as well.

Hindus, which make up half a percent of the country's population according to the CIA World Factbook, have fled Rakhine State after being caught in the middle of the violence. Nearly 500 of these Hindu refugees are now sheltering in a "Hindu hamlet" in Bangladesh, only a couple of miles from where the 421,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees live in camps, according to Reuters.

The Hindu refugees do not want to return to the conflict in their hometowns, but they are also nervous to stay in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, according to Reuters. Instead, they hope to be accepted into Hindu-majority India, which they view as a religious safe-haven; however, the Indian Supreme Court is contemplating whether to deport Rohingya Muslims, so a decision as to the fate of the Hindu refugees will not be made until the Court decisions comes through.

Christians, which make up 6.2 percent of the population in Myanmar according to the CIA World Factbook, experience systemic discrimination and military violence. According to Asia News, Christianity is seen as a foreign religion that poses a threat to traditional Burmese cultural and religious values, of which the military is the protector.

Christians face a new threat in light of the current conflict, as well. Al Qaeda has encouraged jihadists to go to Myanmar to

fight in support of Rohingya Muslims, according to the Barnabas Fund. The Barnabas Fund writes that if foreign jihadists flock to Myanmar, there is a high chance they will attack Chin State, which is the only Christian-majority state in the country. This would significantly escalate the violence being experienced throughout the country.

Despite the violence against religious minorities in Myanmar, attendees of Tuesday's prayer ceremony, who came from a variety of religions, contended that Myanmar is a place of acceptance.

"This is the ceremony which shows the world that people of all religions in our country are friendly and love each other," Win Maung, a regional MP from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) who helped organize the event, told AFP.

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