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Ramadan: violence against those who do not fast

By Kamel Abderrahmani

Asia News (13.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2W1uVB0> - **People modify social customs, clothing and food during the holy month. For those who abstain from food, eating, drinking and smoking in public are a form of provocation. In Algeria, the law imposes fines and jail for those who offend the precepts of Islam. Two young people speak out claiming their individual freedom. One, Sarah, was forced to be hypocritical. Saudi Crown Prince calls for respect for non-fasters.**

Those who do not fast during Ramadan are the subject of discrimination, even persecution, in most countries where Islam is the state religion. However, intolerance finds no justification in Qur'anic sources or in the hadiths, this according to Kamel Abderrahmani. Here are the thoughts of the young Muslim scholar and the personal stories he gathered. (Translation by AsiaNews)

The Muslim world recently welcomed the month of fasting, which is a holy month in Islam and is the fourth pillar according to Sunni Islam. This month is characterised by modified social habits, clothing and food. However, as every year, non-fasters in most countries where Islam is the state religion become public enemy No. 1. Those who do not fast have no right to continue to live like the other eleven months of the year. They are pursued by others, beaten and despised with impunity!

During this month, fasters develop a sort of hostility and animosity towards Muslims who do not fast and also towards members of religious minorities. As an Algerian, I would like to talk mainly about this merciless pursuit against the latter in the name of morals, driving some young people, and I am one of them, to open Facebook pages to fight against this abusive behaviour towards these groups. One famous page is called *Chroniques de non-jeûneurs algériens* (News about non-fasting Algerians), and it was quickly reported by obscurantist forces, yet it continues to publish the personal stories of non-fasting Algerians.

I have long vetted Qur'anic sources and hadith texts about fasting to see if there is a religious basis that could explain this behaviour and intolerance towards non-fasters or a possible religious sanction that we can apply against them! Surprise, surprise! No text speaks of it! In fact, the issue is cultural, about dogmatism, not religion.

To justify their violence against those who do not observe Ramadan, fasters advance completely foolish and ridiculous arguments. For Muslims who observe fasting, eating, drinking and smoking publicly is a kind of provocation against them, an impoliteness, a lack of manners! This prompts me to seriously ask myself a question! Is going after the non-fasting, for example, a form of respect, an act of love and tolerance and above all a sign of a good manners?

The month of Ramadan as it is practiced today is like a kind of folklore imposing social norms that should be respected by everyone. The fact that people – including those who are permitted by the religion not to fast, like the sick or travellers – publicly break the

fast is seen as a transgression of these norms and Ramadan folk laws. The latter generate a kind of psychological high among fasters. In short, no one has the right not to participate and everyone must make sure not to break this psychic "atmosphere"!

To clarify the situation a bit, one has to look at what the law says. Indeed, there is no text that forces Algerians or foreigners to fast. However, non-fasters who eat publicly may be convicted under Article 144 bis 2 of the Algerian Penal Code. The first paragraph of this article states that "whoever offends the prophet (peace and blessing be upon him) and the envoys of God or denigrates the dogmas or the precepts of Islam, whether in writing, drawing, statements or any other means is punishable by imprisonment of three (3) years to five (5) years and a fine of fifty thousand (50,000) dinars to one hundred thousand (100,000) dinars, or only one of these two penalties".

Thus, not observing Ramadan could be considered a denigration of one of the precepts of Islam and that is why, in my opinion, the law remains ambiguous. Moreover, how else can we explain the forced closure of cafeterias and restaurants during the day. What is more, every year, non-fasters are arrested and sentenced,^[1] like in 2010, 2013 and 2017. The reasons for the convictions are related to this article and to Article 2 of the Algerian constitution.^[2]

All this social pressure and the absence of a law that protects non-fasters put them in a dangerous situation that can imperil their security and individual freedom. For Sarah, "It's a daily struggle". The young Algerian woman doctor from Oran has not fasted for two years. "I am being hypocritical all day and pretending to observe the fast. That's why I do not feel myself." She adds that she "had a 'a ha' moment in her life and no longer believes in the Islam practised nowadays", but "I have to keep quiet to avoid problems with my family, society and also with the State."

The second young person who has agreed to speak out is Abdelaziz Lazreg,^[3] a young student at the Philosophy Department in Algiers, a rebel against the backward thinking that reigns in the country. On the second day of Ramadan, he rebelled against the department's administration for closing coffee vending machines. "What this administration has done is inadmissible and it is an attack on individual liberty. We have foreign students at the university who are not Muslims and who have to continue their life like the other months of the year. In any case, I myself do not fast and I am not a Muslim and I have the right to feel free, to live in safety and to be protected by the law because I am first and foremost an Algerian citizen, but our State does not do anything for us minorities, so I have to rebel and wrest my freedom to be what I fully am."

Unlike Algeria, which seems to be faithful to the Wahhabism imported into this country in the 1980s and 1990s and which has since become more established, Saudi Arabia has taken an incredible step in this area and without any legal ambiguity. According to a memo^[4], rumoured to be from the Interior Ministry, MbS says non-fasters should be respected and not harmed. This memo, of course published in Arabic and intended for the Saudi vice police, concerns people who do not observe the fast and break it either in secret or in public. It says that this decision is consistent with a modern vision of Islam, respect for human rights and Vision 2030 advocated by the Crown Prince Mohammed ben Salman. In fact, the greatest preacher of Wahhabism and one of the emblematic figures of Salafist Islam just apologised to all those he misled by steering them to embrace Wahhabism.^[5] Is that enough? In which direction is the Muslim world going?

Sources:

[1] Jugurta Namous, "Alger : deux non-jeûneurs arrêtés par la police," *ObservAlgérie*, 17 June 2017, <https://www.observalgerie.com/societe/alger-deux-non-jeuneurs-arretes-police/>. Retrieved on 13 May 2019.

[2] Jahus, "Constitution de la République algérienne démocratique et populaire (texte intégral)", *ObservAlgérie*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.observalgerie.com/la->

[une/constitution-republique-algerienne-democratique-populaire/#2](#). Retrieved on 13 May 2019.

[3] Abdelaaziz Lazreg, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100004522716807>. Retrieved on 13 May 2019.

[4] Statement attributed to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: the abolition of the penalty of breakfast in Ramadan (in Arabic), *al-hadath*, 8 May 2019, <https://www.alhadath.ps/article/98617>. Retrieved on 13 May 2019.

[5] "Cleric Faces Backlash for Claiming Saudi Arabia Represents True, Moderate Islam", *Morocco World News*, 8 May 2019, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2019/05/272614/cleric-saudi-arabia-aid-al-garni-moderate-islam/>. Retrieved on 13 May 2019.

Upcoming hearing of the owner of the land of a Protestant church in Kabylia

Middle East Concern (30.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZNMbsI> - On 16 May there will be a hearing in the case against the owner of land being used by a church in the Kabylie province of Bejaia. He has been charged with allowing unauthorized worship on his land, violating a 2006 Ordinance that regulates non-Muslim worship.

The church involved is the "Ville de Refuge" congregation in the village of Azaghar, about 180 km south-east of Algiers. Active for more than five years, it has about 400 attendees and is a member of the EPA (Église Protestante d'Algérie), the legally recognised umbrella of Protestant churches in Algeria.

Since the church was sealed by the police on 16 October 2018 it has been meeting in a tent erected on the property. The owner of the tent was summoned several times by the authorities, and asked to dismantle the tent, but the church has continued to meet.

Since November 2017 most EPA-affiliated churches have been visited by so-called "building-safety committees", which also ask for permits required for non-Muslim worship by the 2006 Ordinance. However, the government has yet to issue any license for a church building under this regulation.

The congregation in Azaghar was visited by a "committee" in December 2017 which found safety code violations and was ordered to close. The church has since rectified all the violations mentioned.

Several churches have since received written orders to cease all activities. A number were closed by authorities because they did not have a license, most recently in July 2018. Three of those closed churches have since been allowed to re-open.

In a separate incident, the leader of the Church in Makouda, in the province of Tizi Ouzou, was verbally informed he will be charged for violations of the building plans. This church is the second-largest Protestant congregation in Algeria. The pastor has submitted documentation showing the building is suitable for public meetings.

In November 2018, in a similar case a court ordered the church of Aït Djemaa, 35 km south of Tizi Ouzou to close. The court judgement stated that an affiliation with the EPA cannot replace a permission by a building safety committee.

Another Christian, Nourredine Belabed, was sentenced on March 8 to a fine of 100,000 dinars (US\$868) and a suspended three-month prison sentence under the 06/03 law and awaits appeal in Tiaret.

Algeria ranked 42nd on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2018 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.
