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Algeria's government must respect freedom of religion and belief

Algeria is facing a number of significant changes and open questions about the prospect for a more inclusive and stable Algeria. The large-scale protest movement started in February 2019 ultimately led to a new president in Algeria for the first time in twenty years, but this has not been without controversy. A new draft constitution has been proposed, but whether this meets the demands of citizens remains an open question. Concerns about political rights and fundamental freedoms persist, such as the lengthy imprisonment of demonstrators or the continued closure of protestant churches, alongside other religious freedom violations, that led the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to recommend Algeria for its Special Watch List for the first time.

What are the prospects for the transition to a more stable, flourishing, and inclusive Algeria for all Algerians? What are the next steps that may signal genuine systemic changes and true reforms are possible?

By Scott Weiner

RFI (30.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XrMBpa> - This year, for the first time, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that the State Department place Algeria on its Special Watch List of severe religious freedom violators. In particular, USCIRF is deeply concerned by a recent spate of church closures and the arrest of protesters peacefully calling for these houses of worship to be re-opened. We call on the State Department to clarify with the Algerian government how it approves houses of worship to operate, and to condition future U.S.-Algerian cultural exchanges on the re-opening of all houses of worship and improvements in religious freedom conditions more broadly.

USCIRF is a bipartisan independent U.S. government agency created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Our mandate is to monitor religious freedom conditions abroad according to standards outlined in international law, including Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Based on these standards, we recommend annually to the State Department a list of countries of particular concern (CPCs)—foreign governments that engage in or tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. We also recommend to the State Department countries to include on its Special Watch List of foreign governments that come close to but do not meet this threshold. In addition, USCIRF makes recommendations to Congress and the administration on specific actions the U.S. government can take to better advance religious freedom abroad.

As part of these monitoring and reporting efforts, USCIRF has been focused on political developments in Algeria. The country's Hirak protest movement has created immense opportunities for greater political freedom in this vibrant and diverse country, whose

people are calling for an accountable government that protects the rights of its citizens. As that government looks toward the future, it is imperative that it respect its citizens' calls for greater freedom of religion and belief as a part of the larger structural changes necessary to move Algeria in a positive direction. The United States government has an important role to play in supporting this process, especially at this pivotal moment in Algeria's history.

Unfortunately, as described in USCIRF's 2020 Annual Report, the Algerian government has increasingly engaged in systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom. It arrests and prosecutes Ahmadi Muslims for "insulting Islam" and collecting religious donations without a license. More than 315 members of that community stood trial in Algeria between 2016 and 2018, persecuted by a government that considers their religious beliefs blasphemous. In fact, Algerians can face prison terms of up to five years for blasphemy under article 144 Section 2 of the Criminal Code and article 77 of the Information Code of 1990. Article 26 of the Criminal Code furthermore censors content "contrary to Islamic morals" as determined by the government.

The Algerian government also has closed 12 churches affiliated with the Association of Protestant Churches of Algeria (EPA) since late 2018, three of them in a single day in 2019 in the northern Tizi Ouzou province. Police beat and removed Pastor Salah Chalah of the Church of the Full Gospel in that province, and they have arrested congregants conducting peaceful protests against these closures elsewhere. The government of Algeria claims these churches lack a permit from the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which was established by Ordinance 06-03 in 2006. However, since its establishment, that commission has met rarely and has not issued even a single permit for any church seeking registration. As a result, virtually no Evangelical church in Algeria can operate legally, even those attempting for years to obtain permits and operate within the boundaries of the law. Under international human rights law, registration requirements cannot be compulsory in order to practice religion.

USCIRF has recommended that the State Department add Algeria to its Special Watch List for these systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations. We note with great concern that many Algerians are unable to exercise their essential freedom of religion and belief as guaranteed under international law. At this critical moment in Algeria's history, it is imperative that the United States government urge its government to respect these freedoms, which are deeply intertwined with the political progress Algerians are seeking.

Specifically, the U.S. Embassy in Algiers should meet with the Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and clarify procedures for issuing permits for houses of worship. Governments should not interfere arbitrarily with their citizens' freedom to worship and engage in other religious practices; accordingly, Algeria's permit system should not be used as a legal weapon to violate the freedom of religious groups, and the government must cease its harassment and arrest of those citizens who are peacefully protesting this system.

The U.S. government also should condition future cultural exchange programs on the improvement of religious freedom and related human rights conditions in Algeria. Governments such as that of Algeria, which close churches and arrest religious minorities on the basis of their beliefs, should not enjoy a 'business as usual' relationship with the United States. Algeria should not be able to send delegations to the United States on the pretext of learning more about fundamental freedoms while it systematically violates them at home.

In an atmosphere of political change in Algeria, the United States has an important role to play in helping Algerians guarantee their freedom of religion and belief. The U.S.-

Algeria relationship also stands to benefit greatly from a partnership between two countries that hold these freedoms in high regard. We therefore urge the U.S. government to actively and boldly advocate for these freedoms, and to impose real costs should Algeria's government continue to deny its citizens the ability to exercise them.

Algeria's opportunity for freedom

Algeria is facing a number of significant changes and open questions about the prospect for a more inclusive and stable Algeria. The large-scale protest movement started in February 2019 ultimately led to a new president in Algeria for the first time in twenty years, but this has not been without controversy. A new draft constitution has been proposed, but whether this meets the demands of citizens remains an open question. Concerns about political rights and fundamental freedoms persist, such as the lengthy imprisonment of demonstrators or the continued closure of protestant churches, alongside other religious freedom violations, that led the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to recommend Algeria for its Special Watch List for the first time.

What are the prospects for the transition to a more stable, flourishing, and inclusive Algeria for all Algerians? What are the next steps that may signal genuine systemic changes and true reforms are possible?

By Claire Evans

RFI (29.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Pp5dlh> - Algeria stands on the brink of political change. For the first time in 20 years, Algeria has a new government. They've promised constitutional reform, an end to corruption, and protection of human rights. But underscoring each of these promises is the same question that has haunted the church ever since Algeria gained independence: is Christianity welcome?

Christianity owes much of its historical theological thought to Algerians, but by the time Algeria had gained independence, most Christians in the country were foreigners. The church's presence evaporated almost overnight as Algeria attempted to recreate its own identity following French colonialism. The subsequent question of whether Christianity belongs in Algeria was portrayed in the 2010 film *Of Gods and Men*. The film follows the story of Trappist monks who made the choice to stay in Algeria despite the violence directed at Christians. Nearly 25 years ago, they were murdered for their faith. Sensing their upcoming deaths and the hardships that future Algerians would face, one of the monks left behind a letter which wished for peace and brotherhood for all, regardless of faith. "May we find each other happy," he wrote in his last will and testament.

Christians would remain in Algeria, but at a cost to the church. Persecution has since never risen to the violence portrayed in the martyrdom of the Tibhirine monks (read detailed brief [here](#)), but the government has taken every effort to control and regulate churches throughout the country. Just four years after the end of Algeria's bloody civil war, the government passed the 2006 ordinance regulating the worship of all non-Muslims. By this point, the traditional church presence was nearly gone because of foreign evacuation. However, the protestant Christian presence had organically grown amongst Algerians. The Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA) was legally recognized by the government in 1972, and had grown from a few families to having a presence throughout the entire country.

The 2006 ordinance was an attempt by the government to suffocate the church. The law created a regulatory system which would govern non-Muslim worship at the hands of a national committee which has simply never formed. According to the law, new churches were meant to gain a legal identity by petitioning the committee but Christians were also prohibited from living their faith in a way which might dissuade Algerians from the government's interpretation of Islam.

A few short years later, Algeria passed another law which further constrained the legal identity of Christians. A 2012 law required all associations in Algeria to resubmit their registration in order to maintain their legal identity. The EPA submitted these documents, and never received a response. It is unknown whether the government will continue recognizing the legality of EPA-affiliated churches.

Throughout the last 20 years, persecution has stemmed from the government's refusal to acknowledge that it is possible for Algerians to be Christian. The violence of Algeria's bloody decade of the 1990s is gone, and for that, the church joins the country in giving thanks. But the stripping of legal identity does a different type of violence directed at the heart of Algeria's church.

The source and summit of Christian life points towards corporate worship filled with thanksgiving. The denial of corporate identity inevitably denies Christians an essential aspect of what it means to fully live one's faith. The lessons of Algeria's early days of independence ring warnings for Christians today. At that time, the threat of violence emptied the churches, and these empty churches were subsequently made into mosques as Christians were denied the ability to live in local community.

Once again, Algeria's churches are being emptied. Only three years ago, the Algerian government visited every EPA-affiliated church under the guise of conducting a safety inspection. The churches were warned that they were not in compliance with the 2006 ordinance, an accusation which had become commonplace ever since its passage. After that, the authorities began shutting down churches.

By the end of 2018, a full campaign which sought to close Algerian churches was underway. Coincidentally, the deaths of the Trappist monks were again remembered in the news as the Vatican beatified these martyrs. The process had started shortly after the passage of the 2006 ordinance, a timeline which creates a subtle reminder that the entire church in Algeria has felt the weight of such persecution for some time now. Persecution has made the church small, but the message of the church is consistent. There is hope for a future - one which includes religious freedom - and there is hope that Christians and Muslims in Algeria, can "find each other happy."

This hope is embraced by most Algerians. The Hirak Protest Movement has effectively forced a regime change for the first time in two decades. While demonstrators have expressed frustration that the regime had not changed enough, the government feels the pressure from its citizens. These citizens do not have the same perspective about Christianity as the government. When the government closes churches, many pastors are approached by the community who expresses sadness at the plight of Christians. Sometimes, pastors are told by local officials that they do not wish to close the church, but must follow orders. Algerians are welcoming Christianity into their community and asking for its continued presence.

However, the government is not listening. Church closures have always occurred in waves and each time the Algerian government feels international pressure, they stop. The last church closure in October 2019 was conducted with uncharacteristic aggression and was met with equally unparalleled international protestations. While there have been

no further church closures, the government has made no efforts to reopen any of the 18 EPA churches which remain shuttered to this day. The government continues its silence.

For the first time, Algeria was added to the special watch list produced annually by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The report details many of the laws which have effectively stunted religious freedom. It is a description that can provide useful tools for improving freedom of conscience throughout the country. By including Algeria on USCIRF's special watch list, Algeria is now being given an outline for making positive reforms for religious freedom. Soon, the U.S. State Department is expected to release their own special watch list. If Algeria is included, this could have significant implications on foreign funding and cooperation between the two countries. It would also set the stage for a more international conversation on this issue, during the annual religious freedom ministerial.

Religious liberty is the bedrock from which all other freedoms flow, and a failure to protect it would have serious implications for Algeria's engagement with the international community. Countries which protect religious freedom have flourishing societies. Countries whose authorities insist upon governing conscience lose opportunities for peace, stability, growth, and international connectivity. They lose their own people.

The peace and brotherhood which the monks of Tibhirine died for is the same peace and brotherhood which all Algerians are currently asking from their government. They hope for this deeply. Algeria is looking towards an unknown future. Constitutional revisions remain ongoing, but real change comes from the government integrating human rights throughout its entire system. This means reviewing those laws already codified, eliminating or making changes which would bring them into line with international human rights standards.

A long-desired first step that has yet to achieve realization is the reopening of closed churches in a manner which demonstrates that each is fully authorized by the government. Many of these churches have been closed repeatedly since 2006 because the government has failed to clarify their legal standing. However, reopening closed churches is not enough; the authorities must go a step further. A process must be implemented which provides each church with a clear legal identity. The removal of the 2006 ordinance regulating non-Muslim worship and reauthorization of the EPA are necessary steps in this direction.

The question of whether Christianity is welcome in Algeria has already been answered by Algerians. Now - as Algeria stands on the brink of change - is the time for the government to respond on whether they too plan to welcome freedom of conscience amongst its citizens.