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## **Two Kabyl Christians sentenced to heavy prison terms**

***Human Rights Without Frontiers calls upon the European Parliament and EU High Representative/ Vice-President Borrell to ask President of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune to put an end to the persecution of Christians***

HRWF (04.12.2020) - On 16 December, a court in Amizour sentenced Abdelghani Mammeri, a young Coptic Orthodox to six months in prison and a fine of 100,000 DA (\*). During the trial, the Prosecutor of the Republic demanded two years in prison and a fine of 200,000 DA. The young Christian, a convert, was accused of "offending the Prophet and showing disrespect to religious principles". He was poorly defended by his lawyer who even advised him to recant his new faith.

On 3 December, Mebrouk Bouakaz, was tried by the same court on the same grounds. The prosecutor demanded six months in prison and a fine of 200,000 DA but the judge sentenced him on 17 December to three years in prison and a fine of 50,000 DA.

There was a strong presence of radical Islamists in the court room to put the judiciary under pressure. No political party criticized the ruling.

Both Christians will appeal the decision.

Read more on religious freedom in Algeria [in HRWF Database](#)

(\*) 1 Algerian Dinar – 0.0062 EUR

[Read more...](#)

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## **The FORB Roundtable Brussels-EU urges Algeria to respect freedom of worship of non-Muslim communities**

**HRWF (11.12.2020) - 28 institutions as well as scholars, religious leaders and human rights advocates sign an open letter to the President of Algeria.**

To:

Mr Abdelmadjid Tebboune

President of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

Copies to:

- Kishan Manocha, Head, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
- Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
- Eamon Gilmore, EU Special Representative for Human Rights

***Re: Freedom of Religion or Belief in Algeria***

Dear Mr President,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders and human rights advocates. We are from many faiths or acting in a secular capacity, representing a high degree of diversity. While there is very little we agree on theologically, or politically, we all agree on the importance of religious freedom for all faiths and none.

We write to you concerning what we perceive as violations of freedom of religion and belief of Christians in Algeria, including the closure of numerous churches and a failure to renew the registration of the association of Protestant Churches in Algeria (Église Protestante d'Algérie, EPA).

Since January 2018, 13 churches have been sealed and 7 more churches have been ordered to close (see list copied below). These churches are closed because they lack the required permit to hold non-Muslim religious worship services. However, the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which is responsible for issuing these permits, has so far failed to issue a single permit to EPA-affiliated churches.

This clearly shows that the Algerian authorities up to now have not taken genuine steps to improve freedom of religion and belief in Algeria. This despite many requests from the international community to do so.

We welcome the recent passing of the new constitution following the referendum of 1 November 2020. The new constitution clearly seeks to further strengthen human rights in Algeria, including the freedom of worship (Arts. 34 and 51 of the constitution).

We hope that this development will lead to an improvement of human rights and freedom of religion and belief in law and in practice.

We respectfully request your intervention to ensure that:

- all the closed church buildings will be re-opened and Christians be allowed to have places of worship.
- the Algerian authorities process the EPA's registration application without delay, accept this application and provide official documentation to confirm the EPA's registration as the representative association of all Protestant churches in Algeria
- All warnings, closure orders and court cases against churches are withdrawn, and permission is granted to all churches to continue to use rented premises as places of worship.

- the Commission for Non-Muslim Worship will function efficiently and fairly, that pending applications from churches are considered urgently, and that responses to future applications are made within the designated 60-day period.

We would welcome a response from you on these matters, and assurance that the Algerian Government respects the rights of its citizens to freedom of religion and belief.

Yours Sincerely,

**Organizations:**

**Ahmadiyya Muslim Community UK**

**CAP Freedom of Conscience**

**CESNUR - Center for Studies on New Religions**

**Charter For Compassion – Yemen**

**Christian Freedom International**

**Christian Solidarity Worldwide – UK**

**Church of Scientology National Affairs Office Washington, DC**

**Coptic Solidarity**

**Danish European Mission**

**European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom**

**European Office of the Church of Scientology for Public Affairs and Human Rights**

**Fundacion para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad**

**Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief**

**HRWF - Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l**

**Institute on Religion and Democracy**

**Jubilee Campaign**

**Middle East Concern**

**Oasis Network for Community Transformation**

**Open Doors International**

**ORLIR - International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees**

**Religious Freedom Coalition**

**Religious Freedom Institute**

**Set My People Free**

**Stefanus Alliance**

**United Macedonian Diaspora**

**Universal Peace Federation Netherlands**

**United Religions Initiative URI – Yemen**

**White Mountain Research Group**

**Individuals:**

**Naseer Ahmed**

Missionary  
French Ahmadiyya Association

**Eileen Barker OBE**

Professor Emeritus  
London School of Economics

**Rev. Brian Britton**

Harvest Family Network

**J. Todd Chasteen**

Vice President of Public Policy and General Counsel  
Samaritan's Purse

**The Most Reverend Joseph K. Grieboski**

Secretary for Ecumenical, Interfaith, and Global Engagement  
Vicar Apostolic, Holy Land and Appointed Territories  
Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of the Eastern USA  
Independent Old Catholic Church

**Gail Hambleton**

Senior Program Specialist  
Values-based Peacebuilding  
Global Peace Foundation, International

**Dr. Muhammad Ilyas**

Chairman IDRAC  
International Dialogue Research & Awareness Centre

**Jonathan Imbody**

Director  
Freedom2Care

**Paul Marshall Wilson**

Professor  
Baylor University

**Faith J. H. McDonnell**

Co-Leader  
GAFCON Suffering Church Network & Anglican Persecuted Church Network

**Scott Morgan**

President  
Red Eagle Enterprises

**William J. Murray**

President  
Religious Freedom Coalition

**Bachittar Singh Ughrha**

Founder and President  
Center for defence of human rights  
Founder and Vice President  
Gurdwara (Sikh temple) Geneva, Switzerland

**Martin Weightman**

Director  
All Faiths Network

**Frans de Wolff**

Secretary  
Dutch Network for Interfaith Dialogue

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## ALGERIA: Freedom of religion or belief

By Willy Fautre, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (09.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3d84Ypv> -

- Short profile
- Constitutional and legal framework
- Freedom to have, retain or change religion
- Freedom of expression on religious issues & blasphemy
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of worship and assembly
- Freedom to share beliefs/ Proselytism
- Recommendations

### Short profile

**Name:** People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

**Population:** 40,610,000

**Total area:** 2,381,741 sq km

**Life Expectancy at birth:** 76 years<sup>1</sup>

**Gross National Income Per Capita:** \$15,000<sup>2</sup>

**Official Religion(s) or Church(es):** Islam (official, 98.50%), agnostic (1.25%)  
Christianity (0.17%), other (0.07%).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Country Profile – Algeria". The World Bank. 2016.

[http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report\\_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=DZA](http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=DZA). Accessed 4 June 2018.






<sup>2</sup> CIA World Fact Book. "Algeria". Central Intelligence Agency. 16 May 2018.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ag.html>. Accessed 29 May 2018;

<sup>3</sup> "Algeria". The Association of Religion Data Archives.

[http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_4\\_1.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_4_1.asp). Accessed 29 May 2018.

**World Happiness Index:** 84 out of 156<sup>4</sup>

	<b>Freedom to change/Keep Religion or Belief</b>	<b>Freedom of expression/ Blasphemy/ Defamation</b>	<b>Freedom of association</b>	<b>Freedom of worship assembly</b>	<b>Freedom to share beliefs/ Proselytism</b>
<b>ALGERIA</b>					

**Death penalty**  **Restrictions: R** **Imprisonment**  **Fine**  **&**

### **Constitutional and legal framework**

Algeria is a presidential republic, operating with a dual legal system of French civil law and Islamic law.<sup>5</sup> Laws are drafted and voted upon within a bicameral Parliament, consisting of the Council of the Nation (upper house) and the National People's Assembly (lower house). In addition, there is a Constitutional Council which ensures the implementation of the constitution and its amendments.

The following are the main laws or legal instruments used to regulate the freedom of religion or belief:

- Constitution (1989 with revisions to 2016)
- Penal Code (promulgated by Order No. 66-156 of 18 Safar 1386 corresponding to June 8, 1966)
- Law on Information (Law 12-05 of 2012)
- Law on Associations (Law 12-06 of 2012)
- Presidential Order Number 12 of 1 March 2006
- Ordinance on the Conditions and Rules of Practice of Faiths other than Islam (Ordinance 06-03 of 2006)
- Law no. 91-19 of 1991 on public meetings and demonstrations

The judiciary is made up of province-level (called *wilaya*) courts and a Supreme Court consisting of 150 judges, broken down by division: civil and commercial, social security and labour, criminal, and administrative.<sup>6</sup> Sharia courts are not included in Algeria's judicial system, although there is a High Islamic Council that serves as a consultative body on "matters relating to Islam."<sup>7</sup>

*Ordinance 06-03 on the Conditions and Rules of Practice of Faiths other than Islam* states that the free practice of religions other than Islam is allowed, provided they remain in accordance with the constitution and other relevant laws. It also requires compliance with national morality and public and national safety. Ideas or faiths deemed contrary to those principles are not legally protected by this Ordinance. Additionally, it bans any unregistered religious activity or group, including the use of any facilities to carry out

<sup>4</sup> J.F. Helliwell, R. Layard and J.D. Sachs. "World Happiness Report 2018". 2018. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2019/WHR19\\_Ch2A\\_Appendix1.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2019/WHR19_Ch2A_Appendix1.pdf) Accessed 29 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> CIA World Fact Book. "Algeria". Central Intelligence Agency. 16 May 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ag.html>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>6</sup> CIA World Fact Book. "Algeria". Central Intelligence Agency. 16 May 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ag.html>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>7</sup> "Algeria, State Institutions." European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation. <http://www.institut-medea.be/en/countries/algeria/algeria-state-institutions/>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

meetings or worship. Lastly, it seeks to protect Islam from any activities of other groups deemed to infringe upon the Muslim faith, including proselytism.<sup>8</sup>

The regulation of religion is managed by several bodies within the Algerian government. Registration for religious groups is required by the government. The justifications provided for denials of applications are vague, including potential risks to national identity, security and morality, as well as the economy.<sup>9</sup> In effect, this allows arbitrary denial of registration, thus rendering all activities and gatherings of those unregistered religious groups illegal.

All applications for registration pass through the office of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) to whom they are required to provide extensive internal information. This includes the personal information of the group's founding members and information about their good standing within society. In order to qualify as a national association, these founding members must reside in at least one quarter of the country's 48 wilayas.

While all associations require the MOI's approval, religious associations require additional approval from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments (MRA). The specific requirements for this approval are not explicitly stated, though it is possible to appeal denials from the MRA through regular judicial processes. Within the framework of the MRA is the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which handles registration and issues specific to non-Muslim communities and groups.

Finally, as part of its mandate to oversee a variety of human rights concerns in Algeria, the National Consultative Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (CNCPPDH) does regularly monitors religious freedom issues. The CNCPPDH allows for reporting and recourse for religion-related violations.

Constitutional articles<sup>10</sup> regulating freedom of religion and belief are as follows:

- **Article 2:** Islam is the religion of the State.
- **Article 10:** Prohibition of practices "contrary to Islamic morals and the values of the November Revolution".
- **Article 32:** All citizens are equal before the law.
- **Article 42:** Freedom of creed and opinion is inviolable.
- **Article 48:** Freedom of expression, association and meeting are guaranteed to the citizen.
- **Article 49:** The right to peaceful assembly is guaranteed within the framework of the law, which sets forth how it is to be exercised.
- **Article 50 (bis 2):** Freedom of printed and audio-visual press and through the media networks shall be guaranteed and may not be restricted by any form of prior control.
  - Unrestricted publication of information, ideas, pictures and opinions shall be guaranteed within the framework of the law with the respect of the nation's principles and religious, ethical and cultural values.
- **Article 53:** The right to create associations is guaranteed by law. The State encourages the development of associative movement.
- **Article 195:** The basis for the High Islamic Council.

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<sup>8</sup> "Non-Muslim minorities in Algeria: Submission of HRWF Int'l to the EEAS consultation of NGOs". Human Rights Without Borders. 2016. <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/0914-Algeria.pdf>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>9</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. "Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 9 of the Convention: Fifteenth to nineteenth periodic reports of States parties due in 2009 – Algeria". Refworld. 15 October 2012. <http://www.refworld.org/country,,CERD,,DZA,,51ed28894,0.html>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Government of Algeria. "Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, 1989 (reinst. 1996, rev. 2016)". Constitute Project. 2016. [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Algeria\\_2016?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Algeria_2016?lang=en). Accessed 29 May 2018.

- **Article 198:** The basis for the Human Rights Council.

In March of 2006, President Bouteflika of Algeria signed a Presidential Order Concerning Religion, which modified constitutional articles and proposed amendments:

- **Article 2:** The Algerian State, of which the religion is Islam, guarantees the free exercise of religious worship in the framework of respect of the dispositions of the Constitution, of the present ruling, of the laws and regulations in force, of the public order, of good moral standards and of the fundamental rights and liberties of third parties.
- **Article 3:** Associations of religious practice other than Muslim enjoy the protection of the State.
- **Article 4:** It is forbidden to use religious affiliation as the basis for discrimination towards any person or group of persons.<sup>11</sup>

Several articles within the Penal code relate to religious issues. Article 144 bis. criminalises any insults or perceived slander against the Prophet, messengers of God or Islam.

### ***Freedom to have, retain or change religion***

Apostasy is not a criminal offence, and conversion is not illegal under civil law. However, various laws intend to protect Muslims from evangelising influences and Christian converts are often targets of blasphemy charges for instances where they explained their beliefs.

The Ahmadi population has faced particularly focused repression on account of their religious convictions. Despite a total population of just 2,000 individuals in Algeria, 266 were charged with religiously-based offences between June 2016 and January 2018.<sup>12</sup> These arrests are justified due to the classification of the Ahmadi beliefs as heretical, or through connecting the community with alleged Israeli conspiracies.<sup>13</sup> They have been charged under Article 144 of the Penal Code, relating to insults against the Prophet, his messengers or Islam, with punishments of **between three and five year prison terms and fines of up to 100,000 dinars (€740)**.<sup>14</sup>

In Algeria's 2017 Universal Period Review at the UN, all recommendations relating to freedom of religion were generally accepted, whereas any recommendations relating to the free worship of the Ahmadi community were ignored.<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates that the international community recognises the issues facing the Ahmadi community, as well as Algeria's unwillingness to put an end to the targeting of that religious community.

As is the case in other Muslim-majority North African countries, Algeria regulates inter-religious marriages. It is illegal for a Muslim woman to be married to a non-Muslim man. In this case, there must either be a divorce, or the husband must also convert to Islam.

<sup>11</sup> Kendal, Elizabeth (trans.). "Algeria: Text of Presidential Order Concerning Religion". World Evangelical Alliance. 2006. <http://worldea.org/news/431/Algeria-Text-of-Presidential-Order-Concerning-Religion>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "Algeria: New Trials Shake Ahmadi Minority." Human Rights Watch. 22 January 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/22/algeria-new-trials-shake-ahmadi-minority>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>13</sup> "Algeria's Ahmadis forced to worship behind closed doors". News24. 25 August 2017. <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/algerias-ahmadis-forced-to-worship-behind-closed-doors-20170825>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>14</sup> "Algeria: Stop Persecuting a Religious Minority". Human Rights Watch. 4 September 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/04/algeria-stop-persecuting-religious-minority>. Accessed 29 May 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Universal Periodic Review Working Group. "Algeria: Third review, Session 27". UN Office for the High Commissioner on Human Rights. 22 September 2017. [https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/algeria/session\\_27\\_-\\_may\\_2017/response\\_to\\_recommendations\\_algeria\\_2017.pdf](https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/algeria/session_27_-_may_2017/response_to_recommendations_algeria_2017.pdf). Accessed 29 May 2018.



No such restriction exists for a non-Muslim woman wed to a Muslim man, but she is socially required to uphold Islamic standards within the household. This same legal preference for Muslims extends to disputes over inheritances, where Muslim applicants win most cases over non-Muslim applicants.<sup>16</sup>

Read the full paper [here](#).

**Concrete cases of violations of freedom of religion or belief in 2018-2020 can be found in HRWF Database of News per year and per country at: <https://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>.**

**A paper about Ahmadis in Algeria and some other countries can be found at: <https://hrwf.eu/forb/our-advocacy-papers/>.**

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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

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<sup>16</sup> Universal Periodic Review Working Group. "Algeria: Third review, Session 27". UN Office for the High Commissioner on Human Rights. 22 September 2017. [https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/algeria/session\\_27\\_-\\_may\\_2017/response\\_to\\_recommendations\\_algeria\\_2017.pdf](https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/algeria/session_27_-_may_2017/response_to_recommendations_algeria_2017.pdf). Accessed 29 May 2018.

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.

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## **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.