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***Christian convert and Pastor Youssef Ourahamane's conviction and prison sentence upheld for the so-called crime of "illegal worshipping" for leading his church.***

**ADF International** (02.05.2024) The Court of Appeal in Tizi Ouzou, Algeria has upheld the conviction of "illegal worshipping" against Christian convert and church leader in Algeria, Pastor Youssef Ourahamane, for leading the Emmanuel Church in Algeria.

Pastor Youssef, who was born into a Muslim home but converted as a student to Christianity, was sentenced to 2 years' imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 Algerian dinars on 2 July 2023 for his involvement as the leader of his church, although authorities could provide no evidence of a crime. In November, 2023, his prison sentence was reduced from 2 years to 1 year.

Pastor Youssef appealed the conviction for a second time to the Appellate Court in Tizi Ouzo, Algeria. Last week, the court upheld the conviction and added an additional 6 months of suspended prison time to his sentence of 1 year imprisonment and fines of 100,000 Algerian dinars.

"We are deeply disappointed to learn that the Court of Appeal in Tizi Ouzou did not overturn Pastor Youssef Ourahamane's conviction or reduce his sentence," said Kelsey Zorzi, Director of Advocacy for Global Religious Freedom for ADF International. "No one should be punished, let alone face prison, for exercising their right to religious freedom. The decision of the Appellate Court to uphold Pastor Youssef's conviction and sentence amounts to a blatant violation of his rights under both Algerian and international law and must be condemned. We are hopeful that the Supreme Court of Algeria will hear Pastor Youssef's case and finally and fully acquit him so that he can resume his duties as a pastor. The international community must continue to advocate for the rights of all Algerians to freely live out their faith and worship in community without fear of persecution."

ADF International is coordinating with other NGOs to support Pastor Youssef and his right to worship freely with international advocacy and to raise his case with government officials from over 40 countries.

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## **Background**

Pastor Youssef Ourahamane, who has been leading Christian congregations in Algeria for over 30 years, appealed his conviction for illegal worshipping in his church on 26th March 2024, the date of his 36th wedding anniversary.

Pastor Youssef is one of the leading figures in the Église Protestante d'Algérie (EPA), the Evangelical Protestant group whose 43 churches have been forcibly closed by the Authorities since 2019, leaving only one with its doors open today. Over the past five years, security police in Algeria who received orders from the Ministry of Interior, systematically went around the churches and claimed that alleged "health and safety" concerns meant that they were justified in putting locks over the doors and declaring the worship inside to be illegal. In one case, they physically beat a Pastor in front of his young child because he was peacefully protesting against the closure of his church.

Pastor Youssef has been defending himself in court for his peaceful Christian activities since 2008. He claims that he is just the latest person out of 50 Christians to have been convicted by the Courts over the past few years, under the vague offenses of "shaking the faith" of Muslims, illegal worship, or embezzling of tithing donations. The convictions are thought to be a reaction to the fact that the government been concerned about the large numbers of local Christian converts in the country. "In the 1970s", he said, "the government gave out licenses to churches which were largely full of expats. Today, the government is concerned that our churches are almost entirely filled with large numbers of Algerian converts and they therefore want to suppress the spread of the gospel among us".

On 27 March 2024, a different Pastor and four Elders from the church also appealed their three-year prison sentences and fines of 200,000 Algerian dinars.

## **Religious persecution in Algeria**

Algeria is home to nearly 43 million people, with 99% of the population identifying as Sunni Muslim. Christians fall into the 1% of religious minorities. Islam is the official state religion, but Algeria's constitution recognizes the right of all to worship and speak freely. The Algerian government limits religious freedom and expression through the enforcement of laws, including egregious blasphemy and anti-proselytism laws, which intentionally target and violate the religious freedom rights of Christians and other religious minorities.

Algeria's penal and information codes criminalize blasphemy, with punishments including imprisonment for up to five years and fines. The Criminal Code also censors publications by prohibiting content that is "contrary to Islamic morals". In particular, the government has systematically cracked down on the Evangelical Protestant Church, of which Pastor Soudad is a member and leader, through church closures and raids.

Violations of the rights of religious minorities are in violation of both international and domestic law. Algeria is a signatory to major human rights treaties, committing it to upholding the rights to freedom of religion and expression.

Governments and the international community have highlighted the ongoing plight of religious minorities in Algeria. USCIRF advised in its 2024 Annual Report that the country be recommended for the State Department's "Special Watch List" for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. In 2021, several U.S. Senators sent

a [letter](#) to Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling on him to address the increased persecution of religious minorities in Algeria.

In addition to Pastor Youssef, ADF International also advocated for the release of [Hamid Soudad](#), a Christian-convert and leader in the Evangelical Church of Algeria, who was finally released from prison following a five-year ordeal. In January 2021, Soudad was arrested, convicted, and sentenced in an expedited trial to five years in prison for allegedly insulting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad through a cartoon he shared on Facebook in 2018. He was finally released from prison in 2023 following advocacy from ADF International and other religious freedom leaders from across the globe.

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