

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	252
Land:	Algeriet
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Algeria: Crackdown on Protestant Faith
Udgivet:	24. oktober 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	3. februar 2020

Document #2019055

HRW – Human Rights Watch

Algeria: Crackdown on Protestant Faith

(Beirut) – The recent closure of three Protestant churches and a police assault on worshipers at one church are the latest examples of the repression of this tiny religious minority in Algeria (<https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/algeria>), Human Rights Watch said today. The government should immediately reopen the churches and publicly commit to protecting freedom for all religious communities in Algeria.

Police raided and shut the biggest Protestant church in the country, the Full Gospel Church, in Tizi Ouzou, on October 15, 2019, and assaulted worshipers, including Salah Chalah, the church’s pastor and president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (Eglise Protestante d’Algérie, EPA), Chalah told Human Rights Watch. The following day, police sealed two other churches in Tizi Ouzou province. On October 17, police arrested, and later released, dozens of Protestants who were protesting the crackdown in front of the Tizi Ouzou governorate.

“Algerian authorities should allow religious minorities the same freedom to practice their faith as the Muslim majority,” said Sarah Leah Whitson (<https://www.hrw.org/about/people/sarah-leah-whitson>), Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “All churches that have been shut arbitrarily should be allowed to reopen.”

The three closures bring to 12 the number of Protestant churches the authorities have closed since November 2018, the Protestant Church of Algeria said, mostly on the grounds that the state has not granted permission for these sites to be used as places of worship, as required by Ordinance 06-03 of 2006, “Governing the Practice of Religions other than Islam.” The Protestant Church of Algeria said that the authorities rarely approve their applications, putting their churches at constant risk of closure.

The authorities have also declined to renew the Protestant Church of Algeria’s status as a legally recognized association, which it has had since 1974. A 2012 law (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/30/algeria-bureaucratic-plays-used-stifle-associations>) requires associations to re-register.

Chalah said that he received a summons from the Tizi Ouzou police on October 12, 2019. When he presented himself the following day, an officer asked him to sign an order from the governor to close his church, which he refused to do.

On October 15, at around 5 p.m., shortly after the afternoon prayers, police entered the church and forced around 15 worshipers out, Chalah told Human Rights Watch. He said they used batons and injured him and several others. He obtained a medical certificate from the Nedir Mohamed Hospital in Tizi Ouzou, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, stating that he suffered trauma to his left leg that requires eight days of rest.

The Protestant Church of Algeria has 46 affiliated churches, Chalah said.

To comply with the 2012 Law on Associations, the Protestant Church of Algeria, after a general assembly, submitted its registration documents to the Interior Ministry on August 11, 2014, and again in July 2015, through the mail, but never received a registration receipt despite several efforts to follow up, Chalah said.

He told Human Rights Watch that the Protestant Church of Algeria has also tried to comply with Ordinance 06-03, which allows collective worship only in a building designated for that purpose and with prior permission from the National Commission for the Practice of Religions, to be created within the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

He said that he sent a request in October 2008 to use a building belonging to the Protestant community in Tizi Ouzou and renewed his request several times, without receiving an answer. He said dozens of other churches had requested an authorization from that ministry, to no avail.

Human Rights Watch reviewed the sealing order placed on the door of the Full Gospel Church. Dated October 9, 2019, it states that the authorities decided to close the church until the pastor, Salah Chalah, regularizes his status according to Ordinance 06-03 and the Law on Associations.

In June 2018, Mohamed Aissa, the religious affairs minister, denied that Protestants faced persecution (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1253BVXRZXU>). He said churches were being closed because of their “nonconformity with the laws. The Algerian Constitution, which guarantees the free exercise of religion, requests that the people enjoying this freedom respect in return the laws of the Republic.”

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Algeria ratified, governments must ensure the right to freedom of religion, thought, and conscience of everyone under their jurisdiction, and in particular religious minorities. This right includes the freedom to exercise the religion or belief of one’s choice publicly or privately, alone or with others.

The Algerian constitution provides for religious freedom, but states that “exercise of this freedom must be done in respect of the law.” Ordinance 06-03 of February 28, 2006, restricts the religious freedom of, and discriminates against, non-Muslims, by imposing restrictive regulations on worship that are not imposed on Muslims. Collective worship can take place only in a building designated for that purpose and with prior permission from the National Commission for the Practice of Religions. Collective worship can be organized only by religious organizations that have been established according to the law.

Under Ordinance 06-03, proselytizing by non-Muslims is a criminal offense and carries a maximum punishment of 1 million dinars (US\$8,347) and up to five years in prison for anyone who “incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using to this end establishments of teaching, education, health, social, culture, training...or any financial means.” Ordinance 06-03, by imposing blanket prohibitions on proselytizing, which apply only to non-Muslims, violates the right of individuals under the ICCPR to the “freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”

The ordinance and the association law have been used to persecute other religious minorities. Scores of Ahmadis, a community which identifies itself as Muslim, have been prosecuted since June 2016, and some imprisoned for up to six months. The Algerian penal code also criminalizes “offending the Prophet Muhammad” and denigrating the creed or prophets of Islam. Authorities used these provisions on September 6, 2016 to convict and sentence Slimane Bouhafs (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/07/algeria-3-year-sentence-insulting-islam>), a Christian convert, to three years in prison. He was released on April 2018.

“Algerian authorities can establish laws to regulate the practice of religion, but not laws that are discriminatory on their face and are enforced in such a way that compounds that discrimination,” Whitson said.

ecoi.net summary:

Article on authorities' recent crackdown on Protestants in Tizi Ouzou province



Country:

Algeria

Source:

HRW – Human Rights Watch [\(/en/source/11207.html\)](/en/source/11207.html)

Original link:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/24/algeria-crackdown-protestant-faith> (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/24/algeria-crackdown-protestant-faith>)

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Published:

24 October 2019

Document ID:

2019055

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

