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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Algeria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2016 constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship. The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from behaving in a manner incompatible with Islam. The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion if they respect public order and regulations. Offending or insulting any religion is a criminal offense. Proselytizing to Muslims by non-Muslims is a crime. In a constitutional referendum passed on November 1 and effective December 30, voters approved a new constitution that removes language providing for “freedom of conscience.” Christian leaders expressed concern the change could lead to greater government persecution of religious minorities. In April, the government passed a hate speech law outlawing all forms of expression that propagate, encourage, or justify discrimination. Expression related to religious belief or affiliation, however, was not among the categories covered by the law. In October, authorities sentenced an Ahmadi Muslim leader to two years’ imprisonment on “unauthorized gathering” charges that followed a 2018 meeting between Ahmadi leaders and police officers in Constantine. On December 22, a court in Tizi Ouzou sentenced four Ahmadis to two months’ suspended sentences and 20,000-dinar (\$150) fines while releasing 27 other Ahmadis whom authorities arrested in November. Lawyers for the Ahmadis said their clients were arrested for “disseminating leaflets with the aim of undermining the national interest, the occupation of a building for the practice of worship in a secret manner without authorization, collecting funds and donations without authorization, and preaching inside a building without authorization and without approval.” There were 220 cases pertaining to Ahmadi Muslims pending with the Supreme Court at year’s end, mostly involving unauthorized gatherings. Ahmadi religious leaders said the government continued to be unresponsive to religious groups’ requests to register or reregister. The Ministry of Justice completed, but did not release, an investigation into the 2019 death following a 60-day hunger strike in pretrial detention of Ibadi Muslim human rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar. A court sentenced a prominent opposition leader active in mass popular demonstrations (known as the *hirak*) to 10 years in prison and a fine of 10 million dinars (\$75,600) on charges of denigrating Islam following a raid on his house, during which police found a damaged Quran. The 18 Christian churches affiliated with the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) and closed by the government since 2017 all remain closed. Catholic foreign religious workers faced visa delays and refusals that hindered the Church’s work. Catholic leaders in Algiers reported the government refused to renew the residency permit of a Catholic priest in Tamanrasset, citing a meeting with foreign officials.

Some Christian leaders and congregants spoke of family members abusing Muslims who converted to or expressed an interest in Christianity. Individuals engaged in religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported they had experienced threats and intolerance, including in the media. In April, the press reported that the former head of the Algerian Renewal Party, Noureddine Boukrouh, called for a suspension of Ramadan fasting in a Facebook post because it “poses a health risk and contributes to the outbreak of the coronavirus.” Boukrouh later reported that his posting subjected him to “criticisms, insults, and death threats.” Media sometimes criticized Ahmadi Islam and Shia Islam as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam or as “foreign.” Ahmadi leaders said news outlets continued to amplify what they consider government misinformation portraying Ahmadis as violent.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers frequently encouraged senior government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, Justice, and Interior to promote religious tolerance and discussed with them the difficulties Ahmadis, Christians, and other religious minority groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. Embassy officers focused on pluralism and religious moderation in meetings and programs with religious leaders from both Sunni Muslim and minority religious groups as well as with other members of the public. The embassy used special events, social media, and speakers’ programs to emphasize a message of religious tolerance, although COVID-19 pandemic restrictions curtailed some of these activities during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 43.0 million (midyear 2020 estimate), more than 99 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims following the Maliki school. Religious groups together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shia Muslims, and a community of Ibadi Muslims reside principally in the Province of Ghardaia. Some religious leaders estimate there are fewer than 200 Jews.

The Christian community includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the EPA, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Religious leaders’ unofficial estimates of the number of Christians range from 20,000 to 200,000. According to the Christian advocacy nongovernmental organization (NGO) International Christian Concern, there are approximately 600,000 Christians. According to government officials and religious leaders, foreign residents make up most of the Christian population. Among the Christian population, the proportion of students and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa without legal status has also increased in recent years. Christian leaders say citizens who are Christians predominantly belong to Protestant groups.

Christians reside mostly in Algiers and the Provinces of Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, Ouargla, and Oran.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from engaging in behavior incompatible with Islamic values. The 2016 constitution provides for freedom of worship in accordance with the law and states freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion are inviolable. The new constitution, passed in a November 1 national referendum and effective December 30, removed language from the previous constitution guaranteeing freedom of conscience. The previous constitution says, “Freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion shall be inviolable. Freedom of worship shall be guaranteed in compliance with the law.” The new constitution’s language reads, “The freedom of opinion is inviolable. The freedom to exercise worship is guaranteed if it is exercised in accordance with the law. The state ensures the protection of places of worship from any political or ideological influence.”

The law does not prohibit conversion from Islam, but proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offense. The law prescribes a maximum punishment of one million dinars (\$7,600) and five years’ imprisonment for anyone who “incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using establishments of teaching, education, health, social, culture, training...or any financial means.” Making, storing, or distributing printed documents or audiovisual materials with the intent of “shaking the faith” of a Muslim is also illegal and subject to the same penalties.

The law criminalizes “offending the Prophet Muhammad” or any other prophets. The penal code provides punishment of three to five years in prison and/or a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$380-\$760) for denigrating the creed or prophets of Islam through writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means. The law also criminalizes insults directed at any other religion, with the same penalties.

The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion if they respect public order and regulations.

The constitution establishes a High Islamic Council and states the council shall encourage and promote *ijtihad* (the use of independent reasoning as a source of Islamic law for issues not precisely addressed in the Quran) and express opinions on religious questions presented for its review. The President appoints the members of the council and oversees its work. The constitution requires the council to submit regular reports to the President on its activities. A presidential decree further defines the council’s mission as taking responsibility for all questions related to Islam, for correcting mistaken perceptions, and for promoting the true fundamentals and correct understanding of the religion. The council may issue *fatwas* at the request of the President.

The law requires any group, religious or otherwise, to register with the government as an association prior to conducting any activities. Under the Associations Law passed in 2012, the government required all organizations previously registered to reregister. The Ministry of Interior grants association status to religious groups; only registered associations are officially recognized. The ministry registration requirements for national-level associations stipulate the founding members must furnish documents proving their identities, addresses, and other biographic details; provide police and judicial records to prove their good standing in society; demonstrate they have founding members residing in at least one quarter of the country’s provinces to prove the association merits national standing; submit the association’s constitution signed by its president; and submit documents indicating the location of its headquarters.

The law requires the Ministry of Interior to provide a receipt for the application once it has received all required documentation. The ministry has 60 days to respond to applicants following the submission of a completed application. If the ministry does not respond within the 60-day timeframe, the application is automatically approved, and the receipt may be used as proof of registration. If the ministry considers the application incomplete, it does not issue a receipt for the application. The law grants the government full discretion in making registration decisions but provides applicants an opportunity to appeal a denial to an administrative tribunal. For associations seeking to register at the local or provincial level, application requirements are similar, but the association’s membership and sphere of activity is strictly limited to the area in which it registers. An association registered at the *wilaya* (provincial) level is confined to that specific *wilaya*.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) has the right to review registration applications of religious associations, but the Ministry of Interior makes the final decision. The law, however, does not specify additional requirements for religious associations or further specify the MRA’s role in the process.

The National Committee for Non-Muslim Worship, a government entity, facilitates the registration process for all non-Muslim groups. The MRA presides over the committee, composed of senior representatives of the Ministries of National Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs; the presidency; national police; national gendarmerie; and the governmental National Human Rights Council (CNDH).

The constitution requires a presidential candidate to be Muslim. Under the law, non-Muslims may hold other public offices and work within the government.

The law prohibits religious associations from receiving funding from political parties or foreign entities. The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion. Membership in the Islamic Salvation Front, a political party banned since 1992, remains illegal.

The law specifies the manner and conditions under which religious services, Islamic or otherwise, must take place. The law states that religious demonstrations are subject to regulation, and the government may shut down any religious service taking place in private homes or in outdoor settings without official approval. Except for daily prayers, which are permissible anywhere, Islamic services may take place only in state-sanctioned mosques. Friday prayers are further limited to certain specified mosques.

Non-Islamic religious services must take place only in buildings registered with the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice, be run by a registered religious association, open to the public, and marked as such on the exterior. A request for permission to observe special non-Islamic religious events must be submitted to the relevant governor at least five days before the event, and the event must occur in buildings accessible to the public. Requests must include information on three principal organizers of the event, its purpose, the number of attendees anticipated, a schedule of events, and its planned location. The individuals identified as the event’s organizers also must obtain a permit from the *wali*. The *wali* may request the organizers move the location of an event or deny permission for it to take place if he deems it would endanger public order or harm “national constants,” “good mores,” or “symbols of the revolution.” If unauthorized meetings go forward without approval, police may disperse the participants. Individuals who fail to disperse at the behest of police are subject to arrest and a prison term of two to 12 months under the penal code.

The penal code states only government-authorized *imams*, whom the state hires and trains, may lead prayers in mosques and penalizes anyone else who preaches in a mosque with a fine of up to 100,000 dinars (\$760) and a prison sentence of one to three years. Fines as high as 200,000 dinars (\$1,500) and prison sentences of three to five years are stipulated for any person, including government-authorized imams, who acts “against the noble nature of the mosque” or in a manner “likely to offend public cohesion, as determined by a judge.” The law states that such acts include exploiting the mosque to achieve purely material or personal objectives or with a view to harming persons or groups.

By law, the MRA provides financial support to mosques and pays the salaries of imams and other religious personnel as well as for health care and retirement benefits. The law also provides for the payment of salaries and benefits to non-Muslim religious leaders who are citizens. The Ministry of Labor regulates the amount of an individual imam’s or mosque employee’s pay and likewise sets the salaries of citizen non-Muslim religious leaders based on their position within their individual churches.

The Ministries of Religious Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Commerce must approve the importation of all religious texts and items, except those intended for personal use. Authorities generally consider “importation” to be approximately 20 or more religious texts or items.

The law gives authorities broad power to ban books that run counter to the constitution, “the Muslim religion and other religions, national sovereignty and unity, the national identity and cultural values of society, national security and defense concerns, public order concerns, and the dignity of the human being and individual and collective rights.” A 2017 decree established a commission within the MRA to review importation of the Quran. The decree requires all applications to include a full copy of the text and other detailed information about the applicant and text. The ministry has three to six months to review the text, with the absence of a response after that time constituting a rejection of the importation application. A separate 2017 decree covering religious texts other than the Quran states, “The content of religious books for import, regardless of format, must not undermine the religious unity of society, the national religious reference, public order, good morals, fundamental rights and liberties, or the law.” The importer must submit the text and other information, and the ministry must respond within 30 days. A nonresponse after this period is considered a rejection. Religious texts distributed without authorization may be seized and destroyed.

The law states the government must approve any modification of structures intended for non-Islamic collective worship.

The family code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam, although authorities do not always enforce this provision. The code does not prohibit Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women. Under the law, children born to a Muslim father are considered Muslim regardless of the mother’s religion. In the event of a divorce, a court determines the custody of any children.

The Ministries of National Education and Religious Affairs require, regulate, and fund the study of Islam in public schools. Religious education focuses on Islamic studies but includes information on Christianity and Judaism and is mandatory at the primary and secondary school levels. The Ministry of National Education requires private schools to adhere to curricula in line with national standards, particularly regarding the teaching of Islam, or risk closure.

The law states discrimination based on religion is prohibited and guarantees state protection for non-Muslims and for the “toleration and respect of different religions.” It does not prescribe penalties for religious discrimination.

In April, the government passed a hate speech law outlawing all forms of expression that propagate, encourage, or justify discrimination. Expression related to religious belief or affiliation, however, was not among the categories covered by the law.

The CNDH monitors and evaluates human rights issues, including matters related to religious freedom. The law authorizes the CNDH to conduct investigations of alleged abuses, issue opinions and recommendations, conduct awareness campaigns, and work with other government authorities to address human rights issues. The CNDH may address religious concerns to appropriate government offices on behalf of individuals or groups it believes are not being treated fairly. The CNDH does not have the authority to enforce its decisions, but may refer matters to the relevant administrative or criminal court. It submits an annual report to the President, who appoints the committee’s members.

The government does not register religious affiliations of the citizenry and does not print religious affiliations on documents such as national identification cards.

By law, individuals who convert from Islam to another religion are ineligible to receive an inheritance via succession.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The government continued to enforce a ban on proselytizing by non-Muslim groups. According to media reports, authorities continued to arrest, jail, and fine Christians on charges of proselytizing by non-Muslims, which prompted churches to restrict some activities unrelated to proselytizing, such as the distribution of religious literature and holding events in local community centers that Muslims might attend.

Mohamed Fali, the former head of the country’s Ahmadi Muslim community, remained in Morocco, having fled there to seek asylum in December 2019. He told the online Moroccan news outlet *Yabiladi* that he fled to escape religious persecution from the MRA and Ministry of Justice and said he had seven pending charges related to his faith. In September 2017, authorities arrested and charged Fali with unauthorized fundraising, insulting the Prophet Muhammad, and forming an unauthorized association. Courts convicted Fali and sentenced him to a six-month suspended prison term. Authorities seized his passport upon his conviction, but the government returned it in 2019, and he fled the country.

In October, authorities sentenced an Ahmadi leader to two years imprisonment for charges related to a 2018 meeting between Ahmadi leaders and police officers in Constantine. Authorities agreed to the officers’ meeting with the Ahmadi leaders at that time, but then arrested all seven of the Ahmadi participants on charges of “unauthorized gathering” after the meeting ended. In response, the Ahmadis said that they are nonviolent Muslims who want to cooperate with the government and that the meeting was intended to open a dialogue between Ahmadis and the government. In December, authorities convicted the other six Ahmadi Muslims of the same offenses.

On November 24, a court in Tizi Ouzou summoned a group of 31 Ahmadi Muslims for what their lawyers described as “the dissemination of leaflets with the aim of undermining the national interest, the occupation of a building for the practice of worship in a secret manner without authorization, collecting funds and donations without authorization, and preaching inside a building without authorization and without approval.” The lawyers said that authorities had arrested their clients for their Ahmadi beliefs. In the December 22 trial, the court sentenced four of the defendants to two-month suspended prison terms and fines of 20,000 dinars (\$150) while releasing the remaining 27 Ahmadis.

In August, Ahmadi leaders reported authorities summoned a member of their community in Adrar and questioned him about his religious beliefs. Police searched his home and confiscated his computer, telephone, personal notes, and his Quran, which the authorities held as evidence for a future trial on unspecified charges.

On September 30, police searched the home of well-known opposition *hirak* activist Yacine Mebarki and arrested him after finding an old copy of the Quran with one of its pages ripped. The police charged Mebarki in connection with the damaged Quran, accusing him of inciting atheism, offending or denigrating the dogma and precepts of Islam, and undermining national unity. On October 8, a court sentenced Mebarki to 10 years’ imprisonment and a fine of 10 million dinars (\$75,600). His lawyers said Mebarki stated he was a Muslim advocating for secularism and democracy.

In April, authorities arrested HIRAK activist Walid Kechida in Setif Province and charged him with insulting the President and “offending the precepts of Islam” on Facebook. The government referred his case to the criminal court for trial. At year’s end, he remained in detention awaiting trial.

On December 15, a court in Amizour convicted Abdelghani Mameri, a Copt who promoted Christianity, for insulting the Prophet Muhammad and denigrating Islam. The court sentenced him to six months in prison and a fine of 100,000 dinars (\$760). On December 3, the same court tried Mabrouk Bouakkaz, also known as Yuva, who was a Christian convert. The prosecution asked for a sentence of six months in prison and a fine of 200,000 dinars (\$1,500) on the same charges as Mameri. According to social media, on December 17, the court sentenced Bouakkaz to three years imprisonment.

Ahmadi leaders stated there were 220 cases against community members pending with the Supreme Court at the end of the year. Charges included insulting the Prophet Muhammad, operating and belonging to an unregistered religious association, collecting funds without authorization, burning the Quran, and holding prayers in unauthorized locations. Community representatives said that in some cases, police confiscated passports, educational diplomas, and approximately 40 laptops and 400 books. Among these cases, employers placed Ahmadi Muslims who were under investigation on administrative leave, and the government dismissed 20 public sector teachers and doctors. Ahmadi representatives stated they believed these individuals would appear before the Supreme Court in the next three to six years and that in the meantime, they would be prohibited from working. The government confined Ahmadi Muslims with pending cases to their wilayas and required they physically report to the local court once a week.

During the year, the Ministry of Justice completed an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of prominent Berber Ibadi Muslim human rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar in 2019 but did not release the findings publicly. Fekhar died following a nearly 60-day hunger strike while in pretrial detention. Authorities arrested him on charges of “incitement of racial hatred” for a Facebook post in which he accused local officials in Ghardaia of discriminatory practices against Ibadi Muslims.

NGOs and Ahmadi Muslim religious leaders said the Ministry of Interior never provided the Ahmadi community with a receipt acknowledging the completed registration application submitted by the community to the government in 2012, to reregister the group under the 2012 Associations Law. Ahmadi also reported they had not received a government response to their outstanding 2018 request to meet with Minister of Religious Affairs Youcef Belmehdi or another senior ministry official to discuss their registration concerns.

The Ahmadi community continued to report administrative difficulties and harassment since the community is not a registered association and therefore unable to meet legally and collect donations. Members of the community said, after their initial attempt in 2012, the community again tried to reregister with the MRA and Ministry of Interior as a Muslim group in 2016 and in 2020, but the government refused to accept those applications because it regards Ahmadi as non-Muslims. The government said in 2019 it would approve the community’s registration as non-Muslims, but the Ahmadi said they would not accept registration as non-Muslims.

The EPA and the Seventh-day Adventist Church had yet to receive responses from the Ministry of Interior regarding their 2012 applications to renew their registrations. Both groups submitted paperwork to renew the registrations that had been issued prior to the passage of the 2012 Associations Law. According to a pastor associated with the EPA, the Church resubmitted its 2014 application in 2015 and 2016 but was never reregistered despite several follow-ups with the government. Neither church received receipts for their registration attempts.

Some religious groups stated they functioned as registered 60 days after having submitted their application, even though they had not received a Ministry of Interior confirmation. Such groups stated, however, that service providers such as utilities and banks refused to provide services without proof of registration. As a result, these groups faced the same administrative obstacles as unregistered associations. They also had limited standing to pursue legal complaints and could not engage in charitable activities, which required bank accounts.

Numerous Christian leaders stated they had no contact with the National Committee for Non-Muslim Worship, despite its legal mandate to work with them on registration. A Christian NGO and Christian publication said there was no indication that the committee had ever met. They again stated that the government disproportionately targeted Protestant groups for unfavorable treatment; the leaders attributed this to the emphasis of some Protestant groups on proselytizing and conversion, as well as to the EPA’s primarily Algerian composition.

The MRA said it does not view Ibadi as a minority group and considers the Ibadi religious school a part of the country’s Muslim community. Muslim scholars affirmed Ibadi could pray in Sunni mosques, and Sunnis could pray in Ibadi mosques.

In January, *Morning Star News* reported that a pastor of an Oran church affiliated with the EPA received an order to close the church on January 11. Authorities originally ordered the church closed in 2017 because it was not registered with the government as an association. Following appeals, a court issued a judgment to close the church on November 10 but had not delivered the order to the church by year’s end, according to the pastor.

According to media reports and EPA statements, since 2017 the government closed at least 18 EPA churches, all of which remained closed. In August, the administrative court rejected the EPA’s request to reopen the EPA-affiliated Spring of Life church in Makouda, which the government closed in 2019 for hosting unauthorized gatherings. The government said the churches it closed were operating without government authorization, illegally printing evangelical publications, and failed to meet building safety codes.

In December, an international group that described itself as being comprised “of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, and human rights advocates” signed a letter to President Abdelmadjid Tebboune regarding “violations of freedom of religion and belief of Christians in Algeria, including closure of numerous churches and a failure to renew the registration of the [EPA].” According to the letter, the government closed 13 churches and ordered seven more to close since 2018 because they lacked the required permit to hold non-Islamic worship services. The letter also stated that the National Committee for Non-Muslim Religious Worship, which is responsible for issuing permits, had not issued a single permit to EPA-affiliated churches.

In March, the government closed all places of worship as part of its COVID-19 response. In August, the MRA reopened larger mosques capable of supporting social distancing measures, although Friday prayer services remained limited to smaller, neighborhood mosques. Catholic and Anglican churches also reopened in August, but the government denied the EPA’s request to reopen its churches, including those which were closed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. In July, the EPA submitted a complaint to the governor of Tizi Ouzou for closing its churches and requested permission to reopen, but local authorities ruled in the governor’s favor and denied the request. Seventh-day Adventists said they intended to reopen when mosques reopened fully.

Pastor Salah Chalah reported that the Protestant Church of the Full Gospel in Tizi Ouzou, which Human Rights Watch described as the largest Protestant church in the country, remained closed. Police closed the church in October 2019.

Some Christian citizens said they continued to use homes or businesses as “house churches” due to government delays in issuing the necessary legal authorizations. Other Christian groups, particularly in the country’s primarily Berber Kabylie region, reportedly held worship services more discreetly.

According to the MRA, the government continued to allow government employees to wear religious attire, including the *hijab*, crosses, and the *niqab*. Authorities continued to instruct some female government employees, such as security force members, not to wear head and face coverings that they said could complicate the performance of their official duties.

MRA officials said the government did not regularly prescreen and approve sermons before imams delivered them during Friday prayers. They also stated the government sometimes provided preapproved sermon topics for Friday prayers to address the public’s concerns following major events or to encourage civic participation through activities such as voting in elections. The MRA said it did not punish imams who did not discuss the suggested sermon topics.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and limited resources, it was unclear if the government continued the MRA’s stated practice of monitoring sermons delivered in mosques. According to MRA officials in the past, if a ministry inspector suspected an imam’s sermon was inappropriate, particularly if it supported violent extremism, the inspector had the authority to summon the imam to a “scientific council” composed of Islamic law scholars and other imams who assessed the sermon’s “correctness.” The government could decide to relieve an imam of duty if he was summoned multiple times. The government also monitored activities in mosques for possible security-related offenses, such as recruitment by extremist groups, and prohibited the use of mosques as public meeting places outside of regular prayer hours.

Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, and Seventh-day Adventists leaders reported they did not attempt to import religious literature during the year. Anglican leaders said most parishioners preferred to download the Bible and prayer applications on their cell phones rather than carry a physical Bible. Anglican leaders also reported it remained illegal to print copies of religious texts.

Non-Islamic religious texts, music, and video media continued to be available on the informal market, and stores and vendors in the capital sold Bibles in several languages, including Arabic, French, and Tamazight. In 2019, the government approved the first versions of the Quran in the Berber language, Tamazight, in the Arabic script.

The government continued to enforce its prohibition on dissemination of any literature portraying violence as a legitimate precept of Islam.

On November 1, voters approved a new constitution. According to the BBC, the major Islamic parties, including the Movement for the Society of Peace, the Movement for Justice and Development, and the Nahda Movement, said the proposed new constitution was “against the Islamic values of the Algerian society,” “a threat to the future of the nation,” and backed a “no” vote. The Association of Algerian Ulema expressed its reservations about some of the articles in the draft constitution before the vote, stating, “There is...ambiguity regarding issues such as freedom of worship, national unity, and language.” Christians stated that one change regarding religious freedom in the new constitution, the deletion of a reference guaranteeing the freedom of conscience, was concerning. As one Christian publication stated, unlike the previous constitution, “There is no more ‘freedom of conscience,’ possibly a way to stop churches and their members from discussing Christianity online or having web-based religious services.” Another stated that “the new constitution’s protection of places of worship means little, given the government’s track record regarding freedom of religion.” A representative of International Christian Concern told the U.S.-based website *Crua*, “This removal [of the freedom of conscience] is what worries many Christians as something which could cause future legal difficulties.”

Christian leaders said courts were sometimes biased against non-Muslims in family law cases, such as divorce or custody proceedings.

The MRA required that couples present a government-issued marriage certificate before permitting imams to conduct religious marriage ceremonies.

According to religious community leaders, some local administrations did not always verify religions before conducting marriage ceremonies. As such, some couples were able to marry despite the family code prohibition against Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men.

EPA leaders reported public and private institutions fired some of its members due to their Christian faith and that in the public sector, the government frequently withheld promotions from non-Muslims.

Both private and state-run media continued to produce reports throughout the year examining what they said were foreign ties and dangers of religious groups such as Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, and Salafists.

Church groups continued to say the government did not respond in a timely fashion to their requests for visas for foreign religious workers and visiting scholars and speakers, resulting in *de facto* visa refusals. Catholic leaders continued to say their greatest issue with the government was the long and unpredictable wait times for religious workers’ visas. Catholic and Protestant groups continued to identify the delays as significantly hindering religious practice, although Anglican leadership reported they usually received visas in a timely manner. One religious leader again identified lack of visa issuances as a major impediment to maintaining contact with the church’s international organization. Higher-level intervention with officials responsible for visa issuance by senior MRA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials at the request of religious groups sometimes resulted in the issuance of long-term visas, according to those groups. Catholic leaders in Algiers said the government denied a Tamanrasset-based priest’s residency renewal following his November 2019 meeting with foreign officials.

The government and public and private companies funded the preservation of some Catholic churches, particularly those of historical importance. The Province of Oran, for example, continued to work in partnership with local donors on an extensive renovation of Notre Dame de Santa Cruz as part of its cultural patrimony.

Government-owned radio stations continued to broadcast Christmas and Easter services in French and Arabic, although many Amazigh Christians said they would prefer services to be broadcast in Tamazight. The country’s efforts to stem religious extremism included dedicated state-run religious television and radio channels and messages of moderation integrated into mainstream media. After Friday prayers, state broadcasters aired religious programs countering extremism. Some examples included *Au Coeur de Islam* (At the Heart of Islam) on Radio Channel 3 and *Dans le Sens de l’Islam* (Understanding the Meaning of Islam) on national television.

Religious and civil society leaders reported that the Jewish community faced unofficial, religion-based obstacles to government employment and administrative difficulties when working with government bureaucracy. The MRA said it had not received requests to reopen the synagogues that closed during the period of the country’s struggle for independence.

Government officials continued to invite prominent Christian and Jewish citizens to events celebrating national occasions, such as Revolutionary Day celebrations at the People’s Palace on November 1.

Senior government officials continued to publicly condemn acts of violence committed in the name of Islam and urged all members of society to reject extremist behavior.

In July, the Ministry of Education required teachers in the Province of Tizi Ouzou to report their religious affiliations. EPA leaders expressed concerns that Christian teachers could face religious persecution and employment discrimination, as teachers are public-sector employees.

Authorities arrested Houssame Hatri in Maghnia on July 23 and said they would try him for his role in a 2014 violent anti-Semitic attack on a young couple in Paris. In the 90-minute attack, Hatri and his companions subjected the couple to physical and verbal abuse, destroyed many Jewish religious objects in the couple’s apartment, and made jokes referring to the Holocaust. After arrest and trial in France in 2018, Hatri escaped and fled to Algeria. According to press reports, under the terms of an extradition agreement with France, authorities will try Hatri in Algeria and he will not face extradition. A French security source told AFP, “It’s a good signal.”

The government, along with local private contributors, continued to fund mosque construction. On October 28, the government opened the Grand Mosque of Algiers, the third largest in the world and the largest in Africa. The Prime Minister and other officials attended the opening ceremony. According to press reports, the project cost one billion dollars and faced criticism for diverting funding from social needs and being a vanity project of former President Bouteflika. The seven-year construction work was completed in April, three years behind schedule.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Christian converts said they and others in their communities continued to keep a low profile due to concern for their personal safety and the potential for legal, familial, career, and social problems. Other converts practiced their new religion openly, according to members of the Christian community.

Several Christian leaders said some Muslims who converted or who expressed interest in learning more about Christianity were assaulted by family members or otherwise pressured to recant their conversions.

According to religious leaders, some individuals who openly engaged in any religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported that family, neighbors, or others criticized their religious practice, pressured them to convert back to Islam, and occasionally insinuated they could be in danger because of their choice.

Media criticized religious communities they portrayed as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam or as “foreign,” such as Ahmadi Muslims and Shia Muslims. Ahmadi leaders said news outlets continued to amplify what they considered government misinformation portraying Ahmadis as violent.

Christian leaders continued to say when Christian converts died, family members sometimes buried them according to Islamic rites, and their churches had no standing to intervene on their behalf. Christian groups reported some villages continued to prohibit Christians from being buried alongside Muslims. In these cases, Christians opted to be buried under Islamic rites so their remains could stay near those of their families.

In April, the former head of the Algerian Renewal Party, Noureddine Boukrouh, called for a suspension of Ramadan fasting in a Facebook post because it “poses a health risk and contributes to the outbreak of the coronavirus.” According to the website *Middle East Monitor*, the posting sparked a wave of controversy, especially on social media, where some attacked him for interfering “in a purely religious issues only Islamic and medical scholars can tackle.” Boukrouh later reported that his posting subjected him to “criticisms, insults, and death threats.”

In a poll conducted by the Arab Center of Washington, D.C. and released in November, 16 percent of respondents in Algeria either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that “No religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions infidels,” the lowest percentage in the region, which compared with 65 percent nationwide. In contrast, 63 percent of Algerians either disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement.

In a poll conducted by a Dubai-based public relations firm in the first three months of the year and involving a team of international experts, 72 percent of the country’s citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 agreed that religion is “the most important” factor to their personal identity, which was the highest level for a single country in the region and compared with a level of 41 percent overall for youth polled in the 17 Arab states included in the survey.

Some Christian leaders stated they had good relations with Muslims in their communities, with only isolated incidents of vandalism or harassment. Christian and Muslim leaders hosted each other during the year. EPA leaders reported Catholic and Muslim leaders sent letters in support of the EPA to the MRA. Other faiths privately expressed support to Protestant leaders, and the EPA reported excellent interfaith dialogue within the religious community. The EPA reported some local authorities expressed regret for church closures, but stated they were duty-bound to follow government directives, regardless of their personal opinions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice, and Religious Affairs to discuss the difficulties Ahmadi and Shia Muslims, Christian, and other minority religious groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. They also discussed church closures and jailed activists.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met during the year with government-affiliated and independent religious leaders and with representatives of Muslim and Christian communities to discuss interreligious dialogue and tolerance and, in the case of religious minorities, their rights and legal status.

Embassy officials discussed the practice of religion, its intersection with politics, religious tolerance, and the religious and political roles of women with religious and political leaders as well as with the Muslim Scholars Association and the High Islamic Council.

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