



## BRIEF: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN ALGERIA

### Introduction

Although the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2019 provided an unparalleled opportunity for Algeria to improve its human rights and religious freedom record, the nation has only succeeded in doubling down on repressing its vulnerable Christian minority. COVID-19 posed new challenges. Every church was closed, but when Algeria made the decision to reopen society, mosques and the historic churches were authorized to resume their activities.

Protestant churches asked the government for clarity about their status but for weeks received only silence. They generally have since reopened, although they never received a response from the authorities. However, the churches which were sealed pre-dating COVID remain closed. As the country has emerged from COVID, there has been an increase of activity relating to criminal charges pressed against individual Christians, namely protestants. Now more than ever is the time for the international community to pressure Algeria to reverse course and protect the rights of its Christian minority.

The Algerian church is the second-largest Christian community in Northern Africa, and it faces a type of government-sponsored persecution that is unique. Like most countries in this part of the world, Algeria is officially Islamic. Indeed, the President's oath of office requires him to "glorify the Islamic religion." Still, Algeria's Constitution contains provisions which guarantee religious freedom, although these protections have frequently been ignored in the creation of subsequent legislation and in government practice.

Christianity has existed in Algeria for centuries and is mostly tolerated by the broader society. However, the government views Christianity as a danger to the Algerian Islamic identity and is making every attempt to regulate the church into non-existence. Estimates of the Christian population range from 20,000 to 200,000. Protestants make up the fastest-growing Christian population in Algeria. The Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA), a government-approved organization of churches, consists of 45 churches spread across the country's many ethnic and tribal identities. The largest single church consisted of approximately 1,000 members before it was shut down by authorities in late 2019.

Since the early 2000s, the protestant community in Algeria has faced three waves of government-sponsored persecution. In each, the authorities target places of worship, shutting them down and refusing to

recognize their legitimacy. The first two waves were stopped after international outcry. We are currently in the third wave of closures, with a series of closures where today we have 17 churches forcibly closed. Completely ignoring requests for information from local Christians, and responding to international advocacy with silence, are by now well-established trends within Algeria. But these trends are newer within the broader historical context of the country's religious freedom.

## Timeline of Closures

| City                            | EPA-affiliated | Date ordered to close     | Date Sealed          | Province   |
|---------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Ain Turk. House of Hope         | Yes            | Court verdict 20 Jan 2020 | Not sealed           | Oran       |
| Oran City Church                | Yes            | Court verdict 12 Jan 2020 | Not sealed           | Oran       |
| Tafat                           | Yes            | 15 October 2019           | 16 October 2019      | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Makouda: The Spring of Life.    | Yes            | 14 October 2019           | 15 October 2019      | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Tizi Ouzou: Full Gospel         | Yes            | 09 October 2019           | 15 October 2019      | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Tigzirt Church and Bible school | Yes            | 25 September 2019         | 26. Sep 2019         | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Boughni- Al Annaser             | Yes            | 18 September 2019         | 24 Sep 2019          | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Boughni- Assi Youcef            | Yes            | 18 September 2019         | 24 Sep 2019          | Tizi-Ouzou |
| El Ayaida                       | Yes            | 19 September 2019         | Not sealed           | Oran       |
| Ighzer Amokrane                 | Yes            | 10 August, 2019           | 10 Sept. 2019        | Bejaia     |
| Akbou                           | Yes            | 10 August, 2019           | 17 Sept 2019         | Bejaia     |
| Boudjima                        | Yes            | 6 August, 2019            | 6 August 2019        | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Boudjima                        | Yes            | 22 May 2019               | 22 May & 6 June 2019 | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Aït Djemaa                      | Yes            | 14 November 2018          | Not sealed           | Tizi-Ouzou |
| Colonel Amirouche or Rikki      | Yes            | 11 July 2018              | 14 July 2018         | Bejaia     |
| Ait Mellikeche                  | Yes            | 25 May, 2018              | 25 May 2018          | Bejaia     |
| Al-Azagher                      | Yes            | 2 March, 2018             | 16 October 2018      | Bejaia     |

## Constitutional Revisions

Protests led to regime change and a constitutional revision process that began in 2019. Some civil society organizations were asked to make suggestions, but Christian organizations were not asked for their comments.

President Tebboune has said that he desires “*a profound constitutional amendment to establish a new republic, and that all articles are open to discussion, except for the country’s constants and its Arab, Berber, and Islamic identity.*” This kind of language was seen as targeting Algeria’s Christian population, particularly in regard to the fate of Articles 29 and 36, which currently state that “*citizens shall be equal before the law without any discrimination on the basis of opinion*” and “*the freedom of conscience and the freedom of opinion shall be inviolable.*”

The new constitution approved in November 2020 indeed watered down this language, prompting concerns that the new constitution will, in practice, have less religious freedom protections than the previous one.