

# BRIEF: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN ALGERIA

## Introduction

Algeria sits on the brink of change as it comes out from twenty years under the reign of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The new administration has the rare opportunity to address the deep, underlying issues that have plagued Algeria for decades and held it back from progressing in the area of human rights and religious freedom. Whether it will take that opportunity remains to be seen, but one thing is clear—now is the time for the international community to pressure Algeria to protect the rights of its vulnerable 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 currently unparalleled in the region. 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 that, from 2017 to the present day, has seen 18 churches forcibly closed.

## Timeline of Closures

Date of Closure	Victim	Status	Violation Type
November 2017	Laayoune Church	Closed and reopened	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
January 2018	Church of Tiaret	Closed	
January 2018	Church of Sidi Belabes	Closed	
February 2018	Oran Church (Oratory)	Closed and reopened	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
February 2018	Al Ayaida (or Layayda) Church	Closed and reopened	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
April 2018	Church of Ait Mlikech	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
May 2018	Church of Ath Mellikeche	Closed and reopened	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
May 2018	Maatkas Church	Closed and reopened	2006 Ordinance
October 2018	Church of Rikki	Closed	
May 2019	Church of Boudjima 1	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
July 2019	Church of Boudjima 2 Bible School	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
September 2019	Church of Prince of Peace / Ighzer Amoqrane	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
September 2019	Church of Akbou	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
September 2019	Church of Tigzirt	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
September 2019	Church of Boghni	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
October 2019	Spring of Life Church	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
October 2019	Full Gospel Church	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation
October 2019	Thafat church	Closed	EPA-affiliated. 12-06 violation creates 06-03 violation

## Legal Concerns

There are currently four legal challenges facing Christians in Algeria. Some of these have completely prohibited worship, while others have cumulated in violent intimidation:

- **2006 Ordinance** (06-03) – governs non-Muslim worship. A National Commission was established to regulate permissions for non-Muslim places of worship, but it has never met. As a result, churches gain official recognition by joining the EPA—the Evangelical Protestant Association—which was granted approval prior to this ordinance.
- **2012 Law on Associations** (12-06) – forces associations such as the EPA to reregister in order to maintain their official recognition. The EPA has tried since 2016 to renew their registration, with no reply from the Ministry of Interior which administers this reregistration process.
- **Safety Commission Forms** (November 2017) – Members are composed of officials from municipalities, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Fire Brigade, the national Gendarmerie, and the Intelligence Department. The declared aim of the committee is to “check compliance with safety regulations.” Every EPA-affiliated church was visited by representatives of the Commission. 18 churches have been closed since this Commission was created, 13 of which remain closed. It is worth noting that it is illegal for Christians to worship in homes, so to close a public place of worship is to make it impossible for local Algerian Christians to worship legally.
- **Constitutional revisions** – Protests led to regime change and a constitutional revision process that began in 2019. Some civil society organizations have been asked to make suggestions, but Christian organizations have not been asked for their comments. President Tebboune has said repeatedly 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 is seen as targeting Algeria’s Christian population, particularly in regards to the fate of Articles 32 and 42, 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.”

These four legal concerns open the door for administrative, judicial, governmental, and professional pressure. A strong example of how these four legal challenges impact churches is the closure of a 1,000-member church in Tizi Ouzou in October, 2019. This was the largest church in North Africa west of Egypt, and the head pastor, Pastor Salah Chalah, chairs the EPA. Despite the EPA’s legal recognition, gendarme forcibly closed the church and beat Pastor Salah who had offered them no resistance. Authorities claim that they are closing buildings not churches, despite the fact that their actions make worship impossible.

One thing is important to make clear—this hostility towards Christians is not reflective of the broader society. There are many stories of local authorities apologizing to Christians as they close a church, saying that they are only doing so because they have to follow orders. ICC has also heard many Algerians say that, when their church was closed, their Muslim neighbors expressed disapproval of these action. Church closures are clearly a problem created by the top authorities and it is at this level that it needs to be addressed.

## **International Engagement**

This latest wave of church closures is the worst one so far in both scale and severity. However, previous experience has shown us that Algeria is sensitive to international pressure. The previous two waves stopped when the United States publically spoke into the situation. Algeria is in the midst of deciding what kind of government it is going to have and is standing at a crossroads. Now is the time, more than ever, for the United States to urge Algeria to make religious freedom a policy priority.

The Algerian government has not closed any churches since the international outcry following the closures in late 2019, showing that Algeria does feel some degree of pressure. It is not enough, however, to stop more churches from being closed—those already closed must be reopened and Algeria must repeal the legal provisions that allow for these kinds of problems to happen in the first place.

It is also worth remembering that Algeria is an important leader in the broader regional context of North Africa. Though it is a closed country, it serves as a buffer for the kind of anarchy found in neighboring Libya, the harsh dictatorship found in neighboring Mauritania, and the Islamic extremism found in neighboring Mali. North Africa is an extremely challenging region, but Algeria has always stood as a strategic regional partner for the United States.

Algeria has the opportunity to be a leader for religious freedom in this part of the world, and encouraging them to seize this opportunity has implications far beyond Algeria. It is in the best interests of the United States to aggressively push for the advancement of religious freedom in Algeria.

