

Algeria's Protestants: We Want Our Churches Back!

The Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) has reaffirmed its desire to regain control of several former churches used today for other purposes.

Christians are the distinct minority in Algeria, representing less than 1 percent of Algeria's 38 million inhabitants, and they often face restrictions when seeking to build new churches.

The presence of Protestant Christians in Algeria dates back to the French colonial era, when a number of churches were built. However, after the country gained independence in 1962, many of these buildings were given to other purposes.

One example is the church of Mostaganem, in the northwest of the country, which became a clinic in 1976. In January 2012, the clinic moved locations, and the EPA sent one of its members to guard the premises in the hope of restoring the building to its former use. However, local authorities ordered the closure of the premises and the expulsion of EPA members, instead allowing a charity to move into the building.

The EPA filed a complaint against both the local authorities and the charity.

"Instead of returning the church, located in the city center, to the EPA, local authorities have just given it to a charity," Pastor Mustapha Krim, EPA president, told *World Watch Monitor*.

"The occupants broke in and changed the locks," he said.

The situation of Mostaganem is not an isolated case. In the northeastern city of Béjaïa, a church once belonging to the

Evangelical Reformed Church (now the EPA) was given by local authorities to the General Union of Algerian Workers after the church's pastor fell seriously ill and returned to France.

Now Protestants in cities like Béjaïa and Mostaganem are petitioning for their old churches to be returned.

"I started to take the first steps in 2003," explained Krim. "I turned first to the governor, who never replied. I wrote at least eight letters requesting hearings to previous governors. Once, one deputy governor received me; he filled a small file, and since then no news. In addition, we sent a letter to the Ministry of the Interior and even to the presidency, but nothing has ever transpired.

"This church [in Béjaïa] belongs lawfully to the Protestant Church of Algeria. At our request, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has commissioned a survey to determine who owns the premises. Finally, the investigation concluded that this property belongs to the Reformed Church, which later became the Protestant Church in Algeria."

After completing in vain all the administrative procedures necessary for the recovery of the church, the EPA brought the case to court, but there have been no tangible results.

"The judge is not doing his job," Krim said. "Each time, he argues that a document was missing in our dossier, whereas our lawyer had provided the necessary document for a complete dossier."

The case is currently with the Council of State (a high court responsible for settling disputes), and the next development may take time, EPA's lawyer told *Word Watch Monitor*.

For now, the two Protestant communities in Béjaïa continue to hold their meetings in the cramped confines of an administrative block of buildings, which hosts corporate and medical offices.

Background

Article 36 of the Algerian Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, while freedom of worship is guaranteed by Article 2 of Ordinance No. 06-03.

But since the promulgation on March 20, 2006, of a law regulating non-Muslim worship, there have been a number of attacks and acts of intimidation against Christians.

In May 2011, the governor of the northeast province of Béjaïa invoked the 2006 law to order the closure of seven protestant churches accused of operating “illegally.”

In January 2011, the Tafat church in the northern Kabylia area was reportedly ransacked and set on fire by radical Islamists.

Many Christians have been charged under the 2006 Act for “actions tending towards converting a Muslim to another religion”.

Sentences range between two and five years’ imprisonment and a fine of between 500,000 and 1 million dinars (5,000 to 10,000 Euros).

Several cases remain unresolved, including that of Mohamed Ibouène, who was sentenced on February 14, 2013, to pay a fine of 100,000 dinars for proselytizing. He has appealed the ruling, but the date of a new trial is not yet known.

In 2008, Christian teacher Habiba Kouider was charged under the 2006 law for illegal possession of Bibles. Her trial drew widespread media attention and contempt from the European Parliament and human rights watchdogs, such as Amnesty International. The case is ongoing.

Algeria is ranked No. 29 on the 2013 World Watch List of the 50 countries where Christians are most under pressure for their faith. The creator of the list, Open Doors International, claims pressure on Christians in Algeria is

increasing, due primarily to the Islamization of the region in the wake of the Arab Spring.

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