

# Alleged Muhammad Insult Lands Algerian Christian in Prison

Convicting a Christian convert for insulting the prophet of Islam, a judge in Algeria last week stunned the Christian community by sentencing him beyond what a prosecutor recommended.

In Oran, 470 kilometers (about 290 miles) west of Algiers, a criminal court in the city's Djamel district on May 25 sentenced Siaghi Krimo to a prison term of five years for giving a CD about Christianity to a neighbor who subsequently claimed he had insulted Muhammad. Krimo was also fined 200,000 Algerian dinars (\$2,760), according to Algerian news reports.

The prosecutor had reportedly requested the judge sentence him to a two-year prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 Algerian dinars (\$690). The court tried Krimo based solely on the complaint filed by his neighbor, who accused him of attempting to convert him to Christianity.

"He gave a CD to a neighbor, and for that he has to spend five years in prison," said the president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), Mustapha Krim, trying to contain his disbelief. "The hearing went well, and the lawyer defended well, yet in the end the judge gave him the maximum punishment."

Authorities arrested Krimo on April 14 and held him in jail for three days. On May 4 he appeared before the court in Djamel, where the prosecutor requested the two-year sentence in the absence of the neighbor who had accused him—the only witness—and any evidence.

The punishment the prosecutor requested is the minimum for Algerians found guilty of insulting Muhammad or "the messengers of God," or anyone who "denigrates the dogma or

precepts of Islam, be it via writings, drawings, statements or any other means," according to Article 144 of the Algerian Penal Code.

Krim said that if the courts start interpreting the law as it did in Krimo's case, then the future of Algeria's Christians is grim.

"If they start applying the law like that, it means there is no respect for Christianity," Krim said, "and pretty soon all the Christians of Algeria will find themselves in prison. If the simple fact of giving a CD to your neighbor costs five years in prison, this is catastrophic."

Defense lawyer Mohamed Ben Belkacem told Compass that the judge's verdict was unexpected and heavy, indicating the legal system's prejudice against Christians.

"We did not expect this verdict at all," Ben Belkacem said. "It was a heavy sentence. The judge punished the 'Christian,' not the 'accused.' There was no proof, and despite that, the court granted him no extenuating circumstances."

The lawyer said he plans to appeal the case. Krimo is not required to serve his prison sentence until the court hears his appeal and upholds the conviction.

"My client denied having insulted the prophet, and there is no material proof that supports this accusation," Ben Belkacem told Compass before the May 25 hearing, "but these types of cases are full of unexpected, last-minute developments, so it is difficult for me to envision the outcome."

At the time of his arrest, authorities detained another Christian convert along with Krimo but released him the same day. Authorities first took Krimo to his house, which they ransacked—confiscating his Bible, CDs, computer and flash discs, according to sources. His wife was able to retrieve the items the next day.

Krimo had "good contact" with his neighbors and sometimes answered questions about Christianity, according to sources. Krimo and his wife have a baby daughter.

The court delivered its verdict the same week that the governor of the province of Bejaia ordered the closing of seven Protestant churches.

Asked if he thought the court had instructions from higher officials to hand down such heavy punishment to Krimo, Krim responded with no hesitation: "It's certain!"

### **Churches Still Meet in Bejaia**

Over the weekend authorities did not interfere with the scheduled worship meetings in the district of Bejaia, despite the governor's order for all the churches of the area to close and threats that police could use force.

"The services proceeded normally, with no police intervention," said Krim. "So we are continuing and waiting to see if they decide to act otherwise."

On May 22 the governor of Bejaia sent a statement to Krim informing him that all churches in the province were illegal because they were unregistered. Registration is required under controversial Ordinance 06-03, but Christians report the government refuses to respond to or grant their applications for registration.

"I know about the closure of all the Christian gatherings of the EPA in Bejaia," Ben Belkacem said. "It's an illegal and arbitrary decision on the part of the governor of Bejaia."

According to a report from Christian support organization Open Doors, on April 23 authorities cited Ordinance 06-03 to order a pastor in Maakouda, a city near Tizi Ouzou, to close down his church within 48 hours. When the pastor refused, authorities called him to the police station, where he presented documentation of his affiliation with the EPA.

The police commissioner claimed it was not legal proof of authorization to operate the church. Compass has learned that the issue has not been resolved, but that Christians there continue to meet.

The controversial law was introduced in 2006 to regulate non-Muslim worship. In 2008 the government applied measures in accordance with Ordinance 06-03 to limit the activities of non-Muslim groups, ordering the closure of 26 churches in the Kabylie region because they were not registered.

EPA members argue, however, that the law is impossible to implement as officials refuse to register their churches despite efforts to comply. They said the authorities only use the law to harass churches.

“It is clear that there is discrimination,” Ben Belkacem said. “Christians are seen negatively by the political system of Algeria, and the judiciary is but an instrument of the system.”

Despite efforts to comply with the ordinance, no Protestant churches or groups have received official approval to operate, and the government has not established administrative means to implement the ordinance, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 Report on International Religious Freedom.

Though no churches have closed since 2008, their status remains questionable and only valid through registration with the EPA.

“Christians live in a very difficult situation in Algeria,” Ben Belkacem said. “They are just tolerated for the sake of foreign politics and in reality have no liberty to worship, since no association is recognized despite the many efforts taken.”

There are more than 99,000 Christians in Algeria, less than 0.3 percent of the total population of 35.4 million people,

according to Operation World. Muslims make up more than 97 percent of the population.