

An Inconvenient Truth

Jamaa Ait Bakrim is the only Christian in Morocco serving time for his faith. The 46-year-old has spent five years in Morocco's largest prison, Prison Centrale, serving a 15-year sentence for "proselytizing" and destroying "the goods of others" after burning two defunct utility poles that were blocking a cross drawn on the front of his private business. But religious liberty advocates say Bakrim's real crime was neither what he said nor what he did, but rather who he is.

"Jamaa is a manifestation of a very inconvenient truth for Moroccan authorities: There are Moroccan converts to Christianity," says Logan Maurer, a regional director at advocacy group International Christian Concern. "The government wants to ignore this, suppress it, and when – as in Jamaa's case – the problem won't go away, they do whatever they can to silence it."

There are roughly 1,000 Moroccan Christian converts in the country of 33 million, but the government does not recognize them. Between March and June authorities expelled 128 foreign Christians in an effort to purge the nation of any foreign Christian influences. Nearly 7,000 Muslim leaders backed the deportations by signing a document describing Christians' work in Morocco as "moral rape" and "religious terrorism."

Religious-liberty advocates say more attention needs to be drawn to Christian persecution in Morocco for it to stop. As for Bakrim, even prison hasn't silenced him, says a Christian who fled Morocco in 2005 and goes only by his first name, Rachid, for security reasons. Bakrim was incarcerated twice before for proselytizing, and Rachid says: "He never denied his faith through all these things. ... They tried to shut him [up], and they couldn't."