

Moroccan Convert Serving 15 Years for His Faith

Nearly five years into the prison sentence of the only Christian in Morocco serving time for his faith, Moroccan Christians and advocates question the harsh measures of the Muslim state toward a man who dared speak openly about Jesus.

By the end of December Jamaa Ait Bakrim, 46, will have been in prison for five years at Morocco's largest prison, Prison Centrale, in Kenitra. An outspoken Christian convert, Bakrim was sentenced to 15 years prison for "proselytizing" and destroying "the goods of others" in 2005 after burning two defunct utility poles located in front of his private business in a small town in south Morocco.

Advocates and Moroccan Christians said, however, that the severity of his sentence in relation to his misdemeanor shows that authorities were determined to put him behind bars because he persistently spoke about his faith.

"He became a Christian and didn't keep it to himself," said a Moroccan Christian and host for Al Hayat Television who goes only by his first name, Rachid, for security reasons. "He shared it with people around him. In Morocco, and this happened to me personally, if you become a Christian you may be persecuted by your family. If you keep it to yourself, no one will bother you. If you share it with anyone else and start speaking about it, that's another story."

Rachid fled Morocco in 2005 due to mounting pressure on him and his family. He is a wanted man in his country, but he said it is time for people to start speaking up on behalf of Bakrim, whom he said has "zeal" for his faith and speaks openly about it even in prison.

"Our Moroccan brothers and sisters suffer, and we just assume

things will be OK and will somehow change later by themselves," said Rachid. "They will never change if we don't bring it to international attention."

Authorities in Agadir tried Bakrim for "destruction of the goods of others," which is punishable with up to 20 years in prison, and for proselytism under Article 220, which is punishable with six months to three years in prison.

"Jamaa is a manifestation of a very inconvenient truth for Moroccan authorities: there are Moroccan converts to Christianity," said Logan Maurer, a regional director at advocacy group International Christian Concern (ICC). "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."

Proselytism in Morocco is generally defined as using means of seduction or exploiting weakness to undermine the faith of Muslims or to convert them to another religion.

Recently Morocco has used the law to punish any proclamation of non-Muslim faith, contradicting its pledge to allow freedom to manifest one's faith under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which it is a signatory. Article 18 of the covenant affirms the right to manifest one's faith in worship, observance, practice or teaching.

The covenant also states, however, that "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

There are an estimated 1,000 Moroccan Christian converts in the country. They are not recognized by the government. About 99 percent of Morocco's population of more than 33 million is Muslim.

Between March and June authorities expelled 128 foreign Christians in an effort to purge the country of any foreign Christian influences. In April nearly 7,000 Muslim religious leaders backed the deportations by signing a document describing the work of Christians within Morocco as “moral rape” and “religious terrorism.”

The statement from the religious leaders came amid a nationwide mudslinging campaign geared to vilify Christians in Morocco for “proselytism” — widely perceived as bribing people to change their faith.

In the same time period, Moroccan authorities applied pressure on Moroccan converts to Christianity through interrogations, searches and arrests. Christians on the ground said that, although these have not continued, there is still a general sense that the government is increasingly intolerant of Christian activities.

“They are feeling very bad,” said Rachid. “I spoke to several of them, and they say things are getting worse. ...They don’t feel safe. They are under a lot of disappointment, and [they are] depressed because the government is putting all kinds of pressure on them.”

From Europe to Prison

Bakrim, a Berber from southern Morocco, studied political science and law in Rabat. After completing his studies he traveled to Europe, where he became a Christian. Realizing that it would be difficult to live out his newfound faith in Morocco, in 1993 he applied for political asylum in the Netherlands, but immigration authorities refused him and expelled him when his visa expired.

In 1995 Bakrim was prosecuted for “proselytizing,” and spent seven months in jail in the city of Goulemine. In April 1996 he was transferred to a mental hospital in Inezgane, where authorities ordered he undergo medical treatments. He was

released in June. The psychiatric treatment caused side-effects in his behavior and made it difficult for him to control his hands and legs for a period of time, sources told Compass.

Two years later authorities put him in jail again for a year because he publicly displayed a cross, according to an article by Moroccan weekly Le Journal Hebdo published in January 2005.

“He has a zeal about his religion,” said Rachid. “He never denied his faith through all these things, and he even preached the gospel in prison and the psychiatric place where they held him. ... They tried to shut him [up], and they couldn’t.”

In 2001 Bakrim again attracted attention by painting crosses and writing Bible verses in public view at his place of business, which also served as his home, according to the French-language weekly.

Between 2001 and 2005 he reportedly wrote to the municipality of Massa, asking officials to remove two wooden utility posts that were no longer in use, as they were blocking his business. When authorities didn’t respond, Bakrim burned them.

During his defense at the Agadir court in southern Morocco, Bakrim did not deny his Christian faith and refuted accusations that he had approached his neighbors in an attempt to “undermine their Muslim faith.”

The judge ruled that “the fact that Jamaa denies accusations of proselytism is inconsistent with his previous confession in his opening statement when he proclaimed he was the son of Christ, and that he wished that Moroccans would become Christians,” according to Le Journal Hebdo.

Bakrim did not appeal the court sentence. Though there have been other cases of Christians imprisoned for their faith, none of their sentences has been as long as Bakrim’s.

“They will just leave him in the prison so he dies spiritually and psychologically,” said Rachid.

“Fifteen years is too much for anything they say he did, and Jamaa knows that. The authorities know he’s innocent. So probably they gave him this sentence so they can shut him [up] forever.”

Rachid asked that Christians around the world continue to lobby and pray that their Moroccan brothers and sisters stand firm and gain their freedoms.

“The biggest need is to stand with the Moroccan church and do whatever it takes to ask for their freedom of religion,” said Rachid.