

Moroccan Islamists Use Facebook to Target Christians

Moroccan Christians say Muslim extremists in the country are aiding and encouraging the government to pursue them by exposing and vilifying them on social networking site Facebook.

Facebook user Gardes Maroc Maroc has posted 32 image collages featuring dozens of Christian converts, calling them “hyena evangelists” or “wolves in lamb’s skins” who are trying to “shake the faith of Muslims.” That terminology on the website, which is in Arabic, matches that of Morocco’s anti-proselytizing law, which outlaws efforts to “shake the faith of Muslims.”

The online images depict Christian converts and their families from across the country and include details about their roles and activities in churches, their personal addresses and anecdotal stories attempting to malign them. “These are some pics of Moroccan convert hyenas,” reads one image. Since March, the Moroccan government has expelled more than 100 foreign Christians for alleged “proselytizing.”

Authorities failed to give Christians deportation orders or enough time to settle their affairs before they left. Observers have called this a calculated effort to purge the historically moderate Muslim country, known for its progressive policies, of all Christian elements – both foreign and national. Amid a national media campaign to vilify Christians in Morocco, more than 7,000 Muslim clerics signed a statement denouncing all Christian activities and calling foreign Christians’ aid work “religious terrorism.”

On the Facebook page, Gardes Maroc Maroc makes a particularly strident call to Moroccan authorities to investigate adoptive

parents of children from the village of Ain Leuh, 50 miles south of Fez. The user claims that local Christians under orders of "foreign missionaries" were attempting to adopt the children so missionary efforts would not "go in vain."

On March 8, the Moroccan government expelled 26 Christian foreign staff members and parents working at Village of Hope in Ain Leuh. Now efforts against national Christians have gained momentum. One image on the Facebook page challenged the Islamic Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, saying, "Evangelist hyenas are deriding your Ministry." The page with the images claimed that Christians had rented out an apartment belonging to that government ministry.

An entire page was dedicated to a well-known Christian TV personality in the Middle East, Rashid Hmami, and his family. The user also inserted pictures of hyenas next to those of Christians, presumably to indicate their danger to the nation.

National Christians Threatened

Moroccan Christians told Compass that authorities had begun harassing them even before the forced deportations of foreigners, and that pressure from officials only intensified in March and April. Â Since the deportations started in early March, it seems that authorities, extremists and society as a whole have colluded against them, local Christians said. Dozens of Christians have been called to police stations for interrogation. Many of them have been threatened and verbally abused.

"They mocked our faith," said one Moroccan Christian who requested anonymity. "They didn't talk nicely." Authorities interrogated the convert for eight hours and followed him for three weeks in March and April, he said. During interrogation, he added, local police told him they were prepared to throw him in jail and kill him.

Another Moroccan Christian reported that a Muslim had taken him to court because of his Christian activities. Most Moroccan Christians that spoke to Compass said the attitudes of their Muslim relatives had shifted, and many have been kicked out of their homes or chosen to leave “to not create problems” for their families.

Moroccan converts meet in house churches. Some of them have stopped meeting until the pressure subsides. “The government is testing the reactions,” said Moroccan lawyer Abdel Adghirni of the recent pressure on Christians.

The lawyer, known as one of the strongest defenders of Berber rights in Morocco, said that although the government’s recent reactions seem regressive, they are part of the nation’s societal transformation process. “The government is trying to dominate,” said Adghirni. “They are defending themselves. They feel the wind of change. All of this is normal for me – like a complex chemistry that activates as different elements come into contact. Things are moving.”

Congressional Hearing

In an effort to alert U.S. Congress to the sudden turn against religious tolerance in Morocco, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission is holding congressional hearings today on the deportations of foreign Christians from the country. Earlier today, the National Clergy Council held a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., to congratulate the Moroccan government on religious tolerance. Organizers of the congressional hearings said they view the council’s press conference as an effort to counter the hearings.

The Rev. Rob Schenck, who heads the council, has had numerous exchanges with Moroccan Islamic leaders and in early April met with the Moroccan ambassador to the United States. “I have enjoyed a close friendship of several years with the ambassador,” Schenck stated on his website.

Organizers of the congressional hearings have said they are baffled that the National Clergy Council, and in particular Schenck, would speak so highly of the Moroccan government at a time when it is in such blatant violation of human rights.

"There's good and bad in every country, but what Morocco has done on the whole to advance religious liberty in that region of the world is extraordinary," Schenck said in a media statement yesterday on Christian Newswire. "We hope to present a fair and balanced picture of this unusual country."

Congressman Frank Wolf (R-Va.), co-chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, said that the Moroccan government has deported nearly 50 U.S. citizens.

"In spite of this, the U.S. government has pledged \$697.5 million to Morocco over the next five years through the Millennium Challenge Corporation," he said. Wolf is advocating that the United States withhold the nearly \$697.5 million in aid that it has pledged to Morocco. "It is inappropriate for American taxpayer money to go to a nation which disregards the rights of American citizens residing in Morocco and forcibly expels Americans without due process of law," he said.

Among those appearing at the hearing today is Dutch citizen Herman Boonstra, leader of Village of Hope, who was expelled in March. Boonstra and his wife were forced to leave eight adopted children in Morocco. Moroccan authorities have refused re-entry for the couple, as they have for all deported Christian foreigners.

Lawyer Adghirni said he believes Morocco cannot survive and develop economically – and democratically – without national diversity. "We can't be free without Christians," Adghirni said. "The existence of Christians among us is the proof of liberty."