



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: ALGERIA

October 2024

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

By Michael Ardovino, Policy Analyst

## Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria

### Introduction

Algeria's government continues to restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Penal Code Article 144 [criminalizes](#) blasphemy, while Ordinance 06-03 [restricts](#) religious practice, worship, and observance. Algeria has closed nearly all Christian evangelical churches in the country, with only one remaining open as of May 2024. The government also denies Ahmadiyya Muslims the right to register as Muslims and continues to persecute religious leaders as well. In May, a court convicted and sentenced a Protestant reverend to a one-year suspended sentence in prison. An Amazigh (Berber) Christian leader also remains incarcerated on blasphemy-related charges. Sunni Muslim worship may only take place in state-sanctioned mosques, excluding daily prayers, which are permissible anywhere. In March 2024, ahead of Ramadan, officials [warned](#) media managers to respect ethical and professional lines and avoid any programming that does not keep with the social traditions of Algeria's society, including the sacred month of Ramadan.

This report provides an overview of the current religious freedom conditions in Algeria. It addresses the legal framework the government utilizes in violating religious freedom and belief in the country. These frameworks include blasphemy laws and legal restrictions on the activities of religious communities, including Ahmadiyya Muslims and evangelical Christians.

### Restrictions on FoRB under Ordinance 06-03

Article 11 of Ordinance 06-03 [criminalizes](#) proselytization, targeting anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim." The ordinance adds that someone who "makes, stores, or distributes printed documents or audiovisual footage or by any other medium or means which aim to shake the faith of a Muslim" is subject to penalties, specifically a one- to three-year prison sentence and a fine of 100,000–300,000 dinars (\$754–\$2,264). The government has also utilized Article 12 of Ordinance 06-03 to [prosecute](#) evangelical Protestants accepting donations, citing the provision that anyone who "collects money or accepts donations without the authorization of the legally empowered authorities" is subject to between one and three years in prison and a fine of 100,000–300,000 dinars (\$754–\$2,264). Articles 5, 7, and 13 [criminalize](#) the "use of an unregistered place of worship," "not worshipping in publicly accessible and identifiable structures," and "modifying a structure for a use not originally intended," respectively.



Algeria's government continues to persecute religious communities using several articles under Ordinance 06-03. In January 2024, the government informed a pastor in the Kabylia region that a court had sentenced him in absentia in 2023 under Articles 5 and 13. His sentence was six months in prison and a 50,000 dinar fine (\$343). He filed an appeal and currently is awaiting a decision with a suspended sentence.

Other cases also reflect the government's policy of trying and convicting church leaders across the country and ultimately issuing suspended sentences. In February, a Tizi Ouzou Province appeals court upheld each of a court of first instance's convictions and sentences of five church officials from that province charged in 2023 under Articles 5, 7, 11, and 13. All five received suspended sentences with varying lengths and penalties ranging from 100,000–200,000 dinars (\$743 to \$1,500). The five men filed an appeal with the Supreme Court. Also in February, an appeals court heard the cases of three separate parishioners in Tizi Ouzou Province, all convicted in fall 2023 by a court of first instance. The court also upheld their original sentences of one year in prison and a fine of 100,000 dinars (\$750) for one- and six-month terms and fines of 30,000 dinars (\$224) for two of the three parishioners.

In May, a provincial Tizi Ouzou court of appeals [upheld](#) the in absentia 2023 conviction of Pastor Yousef Ourahmane after he filed his March 2024 [appeal](#) of a sentence for violating Articles 5, 7, and 13. A court of first instance sentenced him to two years in prison and

a fine of 100,000 dinars (\$743). The court of appeals added six more months' incarceration and another fine of 100,000 dinars (\$743). The court, however, suspended his sentence. Ourahmane has appealed the May conviction to the Supreme Court. He is currently vice president of the Protestant Church of Algeria. An appeals court also upheld the 2023 sentences of four church leaders from Tizi Ouzou Province by a court of first instance for five charges related to violations of Articles 5, 7, 11, and 13. The sentences for each of the four men was three years in prison and a fine of 200,000 dinars (\$1,500). The four men appealed to the Supreme Court with suspended sentences. Also in May, a court of appeals affirmed the 2023 in absentia court of Azazga's convictions of a pastor in Tizi Ouzou Province under Articles 5 and 13. His original sentence was six months in prison and a fine of 50,000 dinars (\$377) and he only heard about the conviction in January. The court of appeals enhanced his fine to 200,000 dinars (\$1,500) and added another six-month suspended prison sentence. He filed another appeal.

At a meeting of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council in Geneva in March, the World Evangelical Alliance [advocated](#) for the dismissal of charges against Ourahmane. In July, the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, along with several other experts, recommended that the Algerian government drop all charges against Pastor Ourahmane and other Christians and non-Muslims charged with exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

## Restrictions on Christians

Although Ordinance 06-03 recognizes the Christian religion by naming it and provides a framework for the exercise of freedom of faith, the inclusion of “public order” and “good morals” in Article 2 restricts the conversions of Muslims, especially to Christianity. Catholics in Algeria, who are generally foreign nationals, are very limited in how they can publicly practice their faith. If they attempt to proselytize beyond the context of the church or home, they can be subject to prosecution and [deportation](#). Algerian-born Christians face a maximum five-year prison sentence for “sharing their faith” with others. The government also restricts fundraising and sets constraints on charity activities after the 2022 [shuttering](#) of the Caritas Algeria, a nongovernmental organization and charitable arm of the Catholic Church. In 2019, the Algerian government [closed](#) several of the largest evangelical churches in the country. As of July 2024, only one remains [open](#) and is in the capital Algiers.

Christians with a Muslim background, many of whom live in rural areas, often [experience](#) social persecution from family members, neighbors, and local ethnic or religious leaders. Relatives sometimes [prevent](#) female converts in particular from watching television or listening to the radio to restrict them from exposure to Christian broadcasts. Converts also face domestic violence or even death in some isolated areas if they discuss religion or reveal their beliefs.

In 2024 as in years past, significant numbers of Christians [meet](#) secretly to worship in the Berber regions, including Kabylia on the Mediterranean coast. Christian Sub-Saharan Africans who have moved to Algeria belong to various churches, including Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, and Coptic Orthodox. Muslim elders in small towns and villages actively criticize the presence of any churches or visible Christian symbols, in effect using authority to control family behavior.

## Ahmadiyya Muslims

In 2024, the government continues to [persecute](#) the small Ahmadiyya Muslim community that numbered 230 in 2023 but [had](#) around 2,000 members in 2017, claiming that its members “denigrate Islam, threaten national security, and violate laws on associations.” The Algerian government still [refuses](#) formal registration of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

The government essentially argues that Ahmadiyya Muslims are not truly Muslim and must renounce their identity as such. Police and private investigators continue to [surveil](#) their activities closely, often as undercover observers at community board meetings.

## Religious Prisoners of Conscience

In April of 2024, the upper house of the Algerian parliament proposed revisions to the penal code, which, on the pretense of “national security,” recommend life imprisonment for any act deemed treasonous. These provisions could further restrict an individual’s ability to speak or share information freely related to their religious beliefs. Article 144 of the Algerian penal code currently [criminalizes](#) blasphemy, prescribing prison time and/or a fine for anyone who “offends the Prophet ... and the messengers of God or disparages the dogma or precepts of Islam.”

On September 1, 2024, authorities released Christian [Suleiman Bouhafis](#) after a three-year sentence and conviction for blasphemy. Bouhafis is chairman of the St. Augustine Coordination of Christians in Algeria and an ethnic Amazigh (Berber). The government claims he is associated with the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylia (MAK), a group seeking political sovereignty. Many Christian Berbers live in the Kabylia region of Algeria, and the government is attempting to link Bouhafis’s group and ethnic identity to the separatist movement. Bouhafis served an earlier three-year sentence for “offending the Prophet” and “denigrating the creed and precepts of Islam.” After serving time, Bouhafis [received](#) a presidential pardon in 2018 and the government released him. Because of his earlier political activities while living in Tunisia, however, and after security agents there abducted and [refouled](#) him back to Algeria, a court in 2023 upheld Bouhafis’s 2022 conviction. They also added additional charges, including “receiving funds from abroad for the purpose of political propaganda,” “hate speech and discrimination,” “use of technology to spread false information,” and “conspiracy.”

## Antisemitism

While there were [once](#) 140,000 Jews in Algeria, today only a small handful remain. While Algeria’s Jewish community has reported few problems with authorities, antisemitism in Algeria remains an issue. Algeria’s government has historically [tolerated](#) antisemitic hate speech, including that which deliberately [conflates Israel, Zionism, and Jews](#).



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### Conclusion

Algeria's government continues to impose systematic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief by closing churches and denying them registration, particularly churches of the Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA). The government uses blasphemy laws to prosecute religious minority communities. It perpetrates restrictions on religious communities, monitoring their activities and preventing them from publicly discussing their faith.

As noted in the [USCIRF 2024 Annual Report](#), the United States government should continue to promote freedom of religion or belief in Algeria. In doing so, it should condition bilateral financial or technical assistance on improving religious freedom. Embassy officials should attend court proceedings on blasphemy charges or cases related to closed houses of worship.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.