

## FOR YOUR OWN MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

Dear

Algeria has been making steady progress in developing a more democratic and open civil society. Increasing religious freedom for peaceful minority groups has been welcomed by many people around the world.

I am therefore writing to express my great concern about the new regulations in Algeria (ref Ordonnance n° 06-03 - 29 Moharram 1427) regulating religious activity of non-Muslims which were signed by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2006.

The Algerian government estimates that there are about 43,000 Christians among its citizens and most of these are converts from Islam. The growth of the indigenous Church has led hostile groups to call for severe regulation of churches and Christian activities. The government appears to have decided to clamp down on this minority and has therefore introduced new discriminatory regulations to restrict “non-Muslim” religions.

Ironically it is stated in Article 4 that religious discrimination is forbidden yet the rest of the regulations in Articles 5-16 then proceed to legislate against non-Muslim citizens in the most pernicious and discriminatory way. Non-Muslims are subject to legal regulations that are not applicable to Muslims, non-Muslims are subject to fines and imprisonment that are not applicable to Muslims, and other religions are subject to restrictions that are not applicable to Islam.

However these new regulations clearly contravene the Algerian Constitution, articles 29, 32 and 41. Article 29 states that “Citizens are equal before the law with no discrimination on the basis of birth, race, gender, opinion or any other personal or social condition or circumstance”. Article 32 states “The fundamental liberties and human rights of the citizen are guaranteed”. Article 41 guarantees “the liberties of expression, association and gathering”.

The new regulations also contravene the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (article 18) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (articles 18 and 19) both of which have been signed by Algeria.

Articles 6-8 of the new regulations legislate for the use of premises by non-Muslims – all worship and religious gatherings must be in designated places licensed by the authorities, public and subject to prior declaration. This gives the state the ability to forbid groups of which it disapproves. More generally, this could prevent Christian house groups, prayer meetings, Bible studies or any other gatherings in houses as they would not be “public and subject to prior declaration”. This contravenes the right to freely meet, which includes to meet privately.

Article 9 gives powers of oversight to a National Commission which in particular must give “*prior approval for the formation of associations of a religious character*”. As well as the ability to render illegal or hinder the operation of faiths of which the government disapproves, small religious groups would find it impossible to gain official permission as the laws on forming associations require 15 members. This contravenes any reasonable definition of the right of association.

Article 10 contains a vague threat against “resistance” to the new laws with sanctions ranging from fines to up to five years in prison. It is not clear what this will mean in practice but it might be used to outlaw legitimate democratic criticism.

Article 11 threatens fines and imprisonment for anyone who “*incites, constrains or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion*”. Possession of materials likely to “*shake the faith of a Muslim*” also become illegal. This could strike at all testimony, witness, outreach or even answering questions about Christianity from Muslim friends. This could be used to outlaw possession of a Bible or New Testament or any other non-Muslim scriptures.

Article 12 forbids taking collections or receiving gifts without prior authorisation by the state. This gives the state power to control in detail the finances of associations.

Article 13 forbids leading an act of worship, organising a religious assembly or “preaching” (undefined) without prior authorisation. Again the Algerian state is giving itself the power to regulate who leads, speaks and teaches in non-Muslim religions. This contravenes the right of free association.

Article 15 allows the authorities to impose heavy fines and dissolve any religious group that infringes these regulations. This is on top of the fines and imprisonment that individual non-Muslims may incur.

I therefore would like to ask you to make representations to the foreign ministry [Foreign and Commonwealth Office in UK] to express concern about these backward steps taken by Algeria to institute discriminatory rules that infringe the religious liberties of a significant number of the loyal citizens of that country.

Please let me know what action you are able to take.

Yours faithfully,

House of Commons

London SW1A 0AA