

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Algeria remained poor, with the government continuing its systematic repression of Christians as well as minority Muslim communities. The government resumed its campaign against the Ahmadiyya community, sentencing dozens of Ahmadis to multiyear prison sentences and often interrogating them about their religious beliefs during trials. In October, the government handed down several two-year prison sentences for Ahmadiyya Muslims in Constantine, while in December a court in Tizi Ouzou sentenced 25 Ahmadis to extended prison time. On December 14, a court in Khenchela sentenced a prominent Ahmadiyya leader to six months in prison and a fine of 20,000 Algerian dinars (DA) (\$150 USD), [nearly half](#) the country's average monthly wage. The prosecutor has appealed the verdict to pursue a blasphemy conviction and harsher sentence.

Non-Muslim communities also faced discrimination. The [governor of Oran](#) forced two Protestant churches to close in January,

and in August a court in Tizi Ouzou upheld the state governor's October 2019 decision to close three Protestant churches. The government also [collected information](#) on the religious affiliations of teachers and reportedly handed the data over to the Department of Intelligence and Security. Moreover, having issued restrictions on places of worship in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government granted mosques and Catholic churches permission to reopen in August, but [Evangelical churches remained closed](#) through the end of the year.

In addition, a [constitutional referendum](#) passed in November indicated further erosion in religious freedom conditions in Algeria. Religious minority communities report that the government failed to consult them while drafting the referendum. The new constitution has removed language protecting "freedom of conscience" for all Algerians, raising concerns that the government may use this alteration to oppress religious minorities further.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Algeria on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Encourage U.S. Embassy officials to meet with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and other relevant government officials, and insist the government deliver clear and timely

responses to registration requests by non-Muslim organizations as required by Ordinance 06-03;

- Encourage U.S. Embassy officials to attend and observe court proceedings on church closures and against Ahmadiyya Muslims to emphasize the U.S. government's concerns about such cases; and
- Monitor the impact of changes in the new constitution regarding freedom of

conscience and advocate that the government continue to protect the rights of its citizens to freedoms protected under international human rights law.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to encourage Algeria to reverse decisions that have led to religious freedom violations and reform procedures related to religious minorities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Raises Alarm about Speech Laws that Restrict Religious Freedom in More than Half of African Countries](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on Religious Freedom in Algeria](#)

Background

Algeria is geographically the largest country in Africa and home to [more than 43 million people](#). Algeria's state religion is Islam, and an estimated 99 percent of the population identify as Sunni Muslim, with the remaining 1 percent of the population comprising of Jews, Christians, and Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims. The Christian community of Algeria includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, and Egyptian Coptic Christians.

Algeria limits the free expression and practice of belief through the enforcement of laws that favor Islam specifically and restrict religious activities. Article 144 Section 2 of the [Criminal Code](#) penalizes blasphemy with punishments including imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of up to 100,000 DA (\$753). A [2020 USCIRF report](#) on the enforcement of blasphemy laws between 2014 and 2018 found that Algerian authorities have declared converts guilty of blasphemy. The report also highlighted incidents of state violence against individuals accused of blasphemy—for example, [Slimane Bouhafis](#) "suffered attacks within the prison system as a result of standing up for his Christian faith."

Algeria has a long history of repression and persecution of religious minorities. Baha'i activities have been banned by law in Algeria since 1969. The government has made little progress on its 2014 commitment to reopen synagogues that had been converted to mosques or churches. In 2006, Algeria adopted [Ordinance 06-03](#) requiring non-Muslim organizations to register with the National Commission governing worship by non-Muslim groups, housed under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This commission rarely meets and often fails to respond to registration requests by non-Muslim groups in the time required by the ordinance.

Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims

In 2016, Algerian authorities [refused to register](#) the Ahmadiyya Muslim community as an association, and since then the government has prosecuted more than 280 Ahmadis on grounds of their faith. Government officials have made public statements denouncing Ahmadis in abusive terms and declaring them "non-Muslim."

In 2020, the government of Algeria continued its campaign against the Ahmadiyya community. In October 2020, a court in Constantine handed down two-year prison sentences to Ahmadis found guilty of worshipping without authorization. On November 29, seven Ahmadiyya Muslims in Khenchela appeared in court, where the prosecutor requested five-year prison sentences and heavy fines.

On Monday, December 14, the Khenchela court handed down a six-month prison sentence and 20,000 DA fine for the leader of a group of Ahmadis and a fine alongside suspended sentences for others on charges that included offending the Prophet Mohammad and degrading the principles of Islam. The prosecutor has appealed the decision to pursue longer prison sentences for the accused. On December 22, in Tizi Ouzou, the court sentenced four Ahmadiyya Muslims to multiyear prison terms and enforced fines against them. The judge in these cases refused to divulge the accuser and questioned the defendants about their Muslim faith. Several Ahmadis who were charged publicly recanted their faith in court.

Oppression of Christians and Other Non-Muslims

Since 2017, authorities have forced 13 Protestant churches to close, citing lack of registration, despite the fact that these parishes filed

for registration and never received a response from the government. The government continued to close churches and restrict Christians' rights to worship in 2020. The governor of Oran forced the closure of two Protestant churches in January. In 2020, many courts also ruled on several [forced closures of Protestant churches](#) that took place in 2019. A court in Tizi Ouzou Province upheld the closure of three Protestant churches in August, including two of the country's largest congregations. In November, a court in Bejaia overturned the governor's order to close five churches there, claiming that the authority to do so lies with the minister of the interior, not the state governor.

Churches also faced stricter COVID-19 restrictions than mosques. Having ordered all houses of worship to close in response to the pandemic, the Algerian government issued an order in August [authorizing](#) mosques with more than 1,000 worshippers to reopen. The order made no mention of churches. In [October](#), authorities in Tizi Ouzou governorate in the Kabylie area, where most Algerian Christians live, allowed 183 mosques to reopen, including several that had fewer than 1,000 worshippers. It also permitted Catholic churches to open, but did not afford the same opportunity to Protestant churches.

Finally, in July the Tebboune Administration [collected information](#) on the religious affiliations of teachers in Tizi Ouzou Province, cataloguing the identities of Christian and atheist teachers and reportedly forwarding the list to the national Department of Intelligence and Security.

Constitutional Referendum

On November 1, Algeria held a [constitutional referendum](#) to respond to demands made by popular civil protesters to reform Algeria's laws to better protect human rights and freedom of expression for its citizens. The new constitution does not necessarily enjoy strong support from the Algerian people, considering the vote was marred by [low voter turnout](#). While the new constitution includes language protecting places of worship from any political or ideological influence, it also excludes language that had been included in the previous constitution protecting citizens' rights to "freedom of conscience," which raises serious concerns about the future prospects for religious freedom in Algeria.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States maintains close relations with Algeria focused on security and counterterrorism, economic ties, and cultural and educational programs. Algeria is an important U.S. partner for regional stability in North Africa and the Sahel.

In 2020, U.S. government representatives in Algeria continued to prioritize religious freedom concerns. U.S. officials engaged Algerian authorities several times to pressure the government to reverse its decisions discriminating against Protestant and Ahmadiyya individuals, as well as to revise and adequately implement its registration process for non-Muslim organizations.

The [2020 decision](#) by then President Donald J. Trump to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara also had implications for the relationship between the United States and Algeria more broadly. The government of Algeria has long supported independence movements in Western Sahara and rejected claims of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.