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Tunisia: The Muslim nation where Christians enjoy relative freedom

Catholic News agency (01.11.2014) - In Tunisia, public expressions of Christianity are against the law and the government frowns on conversions. But compared to the situation of the Church in other Muslim nations, circumstances in the North African country are tolerable.

"The Catholic Church in Tunisia can do its work without political problems, thank God. The authorities know that we have nothing to hide and that our charitable institutions are here to serve the Tunisian people," Father Sergio Perez said in an interview with international Catholic pastoral agency Aid to the Church in Need.

The Argentine belongs to the religious order "Institute of the Incarnate Word" (IVE). He has been working as the parish priest of the Cathedral of Tunis for the last four years.

"The Catholic Church is the only religious community in the country that has an agreement with the state," he observed. That agreement was concluded by the Holy See and Tunisia in the 1960s.

"It gives us legal certainty, but also brings restrictions. According to this modus vivendi, public expressions of the Catholic faith, such as processions, are not allowed. On the whole, this agreement also prohibits any form of proselytizing."

Fr. Perez considers the country's new constitution, which was approved in January of this year, to be step in the right direction.

"It not only guarantees freedom of worship, but also real freedom of conscience. This includes religious conversions, such as those from Islam to Christianity. This would be inconceivable in many Islamic countries."

"Of course, theory and practice are two very different things. But these are still very new policies. We will have to see how things develop," the missionary said.

Fr. Perez also reported a growing interest in Christianity in Tunisia.

"Thanks to Pope Francis, more and more people are becoming interested, especially those who follow Islam more for cultural than for religious reasons. This is also happening in Algeria and some other countries."

Nonetheless, the priest views the large number of Tunisians who have joined jihadist groups with concern. Even so, he said, "Christians have not felt any threats from jihadists yet. The extremists are more menacing toward Tunisians who are considered too liberal" in their practice of Islam. Fr. Perez insists, moreover, that jihadism is a foreign import, lacking roots in the country.

The composition of Tunisia's Christian community, which is almost exclusively made up of foreign nationals, has greatly changed in the last few years.

"This has something to do with the fact that several hundred Christian families from Sub-Saharan Africa have left the country, along with the exit of the African Development Bank. These had temporarily settled here in after being forced to leave the Ivory Coast in 2003 for reasons of safety. The Bank has now returned to the Ivory Coast, taken its Christian employees along. A number of our parishes have deeply felt this loss of part of their community. However, we still have many Christian students here from Sub-Saharan Africa, to whom we provide pastoral care."

The Catholic Church is the largest single Christian denomination in Tunisia; the Archdiocese of Tunis serves the entire country. Various religious orders help to further the charitable mission of the Church, and maintain schools, student residence halls and medical facilities.

There are a number of smaller Protestant as well as Orthodox communities. In 2012, the number of Christians in Tunisia was estimated to be about 25,000, with Catholics accounting for 80 percent of the total. Official records are not kept.

Tunisia orders crackdown on Islamist mosques and radio stations

Reuters (20.07.2014) - Tunisia on Saturday launched a crackdown on mosques and radio stations associated with hardline Islamists after militants killed 14 soldiers in an area near the country's border with Algeria.

The move underscores the difficulty one of the Arab world's most secular countries faces in dealing with the rise of conservative Islamist movements and militants since the 2011 revolt that ousted autocrat Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali and opened the way to democracy.

Tunisia's armed forces have been carrying out a campaign to flush out militants from their remote hideout in the Chaambi mountains on the border with Algeria. Some of the militants are tied to al Qaeda and 14 soldiers were killed this week when dozens of gunmen with rocket-propelled grenades attacked two army checkpoints in the region.

"The prime minister has decided to close immediately all the mosques that are not under the control of the authorities, and those mosques where there were reported celebrations over the deaths of the soldiers," the office of Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa said in a statement.

It said the government would also order the closure of radio stations, websites or television stations that publish messages from militant groups. More than 60 Islamists linked to militants had also been arrested since the attacks on the army checkpoints, the statement said.

It did not give any figures for mosques included in the crackdown or name any websites or media.

Tunisia is one of the main sources of Islamist militants travelling from North Africa to fight with radical groups in Iraq and Syria. The government is concerned hardliners have been spreading their jihadist message at mosques not controlled by the state.

The government has been slowly taking back control of mosques taken over by ultra-conservative Salafist groups since the 2011 uprising.

Tunisia has been praised as a model of transition to democracy in the aftermath of the uprising. The country has adopted a new constitution, and a transition government has taken over until elections this year to overcome a crisis between a leading Islamist party and its secular rivals.

But militants from one hardline group were blamed for killing two secular opposition leaders last year and triggering a political crisis that eventually forced the governing moderate Islamist party to make way for a caretaker administration.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the group's north Africa branch, has claimed attacks in Tunisia in the past, but another militant group, Ansar al Sharia, listed as a terrorist organisation by Washington, is also active.

Buffeted by tumult, Jewish population in Tunisia dwindles

By Carlotta Gall

New York Times (25.06.2014)

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/26/world/africa/buffed-by-tumult-jewish-population-in-tunisia-dwindles.html?_r=0 - On a recent Sabbath morning, just five men

sat reciting prayers in the sanctuary of the Ghriba synagogue, the oldest synagogue in North Africa and the holiest place for the Orthodox Jews who live here on the resort island of Djerba.

It was the weekend of the annual Ghriba pilgrimage, when hundreds of Jewish visitors from Israel, France and the United States visit the synagogue to celebrate the feast of Lag b'Omer. Yet on the Sabbath, when only those within walking distance attended, the true state of affairs was revealed: The village beside the synagogue had dwindled to just five Jewish families, barely 40 people.

Tunisia has been a center of Jewish life since at least Roman times, but only about 2,000 Jews remain in the country — down from more than 100,000 in 1948. More than 1,000 of them live on Djerba, in two settlements where they tend 14 synagogues and a Talmudic school for 100 students.

They trace their presence back more than 2,000 years. The Ghriba synagogue's foundations were first laid in 586 B.C., with, it is said, a stone carried from Solomon's temple. The men who founded the synagogue were Cohens — high priests — who had fled the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, and most of the families in the nearby village were Cohens, too.

But buffeted by political and economic shocks in the last 11 years, including a [deadly suicide attack outside the synagogue by Islamist militants in 2002](#) and violence after Tunisia's popular uprising in 2011, the Jewish community continues to decline.

Three or four families left after the revolution that [overthrew](#) President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. "They had large families and not enough work," said Youssef Gamoun, who, like many of the Jews here, has a jewelry shop in Houmt Souk. "After the revolution, there

was less work and a problem of crime. The tourists stopped coming, and there were burglaries. Things were really tough.”

The 2002 suicide attack signaled that the synagogue had become a target along with other Jewish sites in North Africa. The people of Djerba are reticent about what happened, but 21 people were killed, including 14 German tourists, when the bomber exploded a tanker filled with propane gas at the entrance to the synagogue.

The attack was hushed up by Mr. Ben Ali’s government — the charred walls were whitewashed within hours of the explosion — and Tunisia’s connections to Al Qaeda were never fully explained. That lack of openness has kept German tourists away to this day, said Rene Trabelsi, a Jewish tour operator and hotelier whose father is keeper of the Ghriba synagogue.

The Tunisian government has nevertheless provided a permanent police guard to protect the synagogue since the attack. Dozens of police and plainclothes intelligence agents locked down the entire area during the pilgrimage last month, and military helicopters patrolled overhead. “What happened in 2002 cannot happen again,” said Haim Bittan, Tunisia’s chief rabbi.

Many Tunisians like to emphasize their cosmopolitan history, yet the country is predominantly Muslim and Arab and has been affected by the shocks emanating from the Middle East. Rioters burned shops and synagogues in 1967 during the Arab-Israeli war, causing an exodus of Jewish families. The massacres at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982 prompted more to leave, Mr. Trabelsi said. Tunisia hosted the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat for 12 years, and Israel bombed the Palestine Liberation Organization’s headquarters near Tunis in 1985.

So when the newly appointed minister of tourism, [Amel Karboul](#), decided to promote the Ghriba pilgrimage this year as a way to bolster tourism and champion the Jewish minority as an example of Tunisian tolerance and plurality, members of the National Constituent Assembly gave her a sharp rebuke.

Legislators threatened to censure Ms. Karboul and a senior Interior Ministry adviser over the issuing of travel documents to Israeli tourists. (Israeli visitors are not issued visas but a laissez-passer, which avoids recognition of their Israeli passports.)

“We wanted to make the point not to allow people with Israeli passports and not to establish diplomatic relations with Israel,” said Issam Chebbi, one of the assembly members who supported the motion of no confidence in the minister.

The political furor scared off some Jewish visitors, yet some welcomed democratic discussion of the issue. For the first time, a Jew, Mr. Trabelsi, was proposed for the post of minister of tourism in the new government in December. He did not get the job — “Maybe it is not the moment,” he said, shrugging — but added that for the first time, many Tunisians saw a Jew speaking fluent Arabic just like them on national television and reacted positively.

“Perhaps Jews before were hidden, and now today people find the Jewish question is important,” he said. “Tunisians want to show they are tolerant.”
