



## Tunisia



The ruins of the Basilique Damous el Karita, one of the biggest churches of early Christianity in Tunisia - now overshadowed by a large mosque completed in 2003

Until the 7th century AD Christianity was widespread throughout the region of today's Tunisia. It produced famous Christian thinkers and leaders such as Tertullian and Cyprian. But five centuries later, after Arab tribes had conquered the land and established themselves as rulers, Christianity was extinguished.

Today there are only a few hundred indigenous believers, all of them converts from Islam or their children, alongside a rather larger population of expatriate Christians, in a country that is more than 99% Muslim. Although expatriate churches face few problems, only about a third of the converts can gather for worship; the rest are scattered, and many are secret believers. They endure the normal problems of harassment and discrimination faced by converts from Islam.

Tunisia was the birthplace of the "Arab Spring", and the establishing of democracy after the ousting of the authoritarian President Ben Ali in 2011 raised hopes of greater rights and freedoms for the country's Christians. But political developments in 2012 suggest that the fulfilment of these hopes is very uncertain.

Since the revolution, Tunisia has moved in an increasingly Islamist direction. The main Islamist party, Ennahda, won both the presidential and the parliamentary elections, and the new draft constitution initially identified sharia as "the principal source of legislation". A self-appointed religious police was also given legal status. These changes appear to threaten the very limited safety and liberty of Tunisia's Christians even further.

However, Ennahda relies on secular political partners for a majority in the country's Constituent Assembly, and its attempts to Islamise Tunisian society have been strongly opposed by secularists. Its demand for sharia to be introduced into the constitution had to be withdrawn, as also its plan to insert an anti-blasphemy clause and to Islamise the curriculum in schools. Before the "Arab Spring" Tunisia was one of the most secular and progressive of the Arab nations, and the continuing commitment of many legislators to this tradition may offer some protection to Christians from the worst excesses of Islamism.

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