

## Algeria finds sect leader guilty of 'offending Islam'

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An Algerian court on Wednesday found the head of the country's tiny Ahmadi community guilty of "offending Islam" and handed him a six-month suspended sentence, his lawyer said.

"Mohamed Fali was handed a six-month suspended sentence. He was found guilty of unauthorised fundraising and offending the Prophet and Islam," Salah Dabouz said.

While Ahmadis consider themselves to be Muslims, Islamic extremists have accused them of heresy and since last year Algerian authorities have cracked down on them.

The trial in the western coastal town of Mostaganem came after Fali objected to a suspended sentence of three months on the same charges in February at a trial he did not attend.

Algerian law allows defendants to attend a retrial if they were not present for the first trial.

Fali was arrested from his home in Ain Sefra, 650 kilometres (400 miles) southwest of Algiers, on August 28.

"My client will be released, but I'm shocked he was sentenced in a case where there are no facts," his lawyer said.

Fali faces cases in several courts.

At least 286 of Algeria's roughly 2,000 Ahmadis have been arrested and tried since the start of a



government crackdown last year.

All were handed jail terms, ranging from a three-month suspended sentence to four years, except three who received fines.

Islam is the state religion in Algeria, where Sunni Muslims make up the majority.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by law, but preachers and places of worship must be licensed by the government.

The Ahmadis have never applied, believing they would face certain rejection.

Founded in late 19th-century India, the Ahmadiyya movement only reached Algeria in 2007.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation -- of which Algeria is a member -- declared in 1973 that the movement was not linked to the Muslim faith.

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