

Algerian child's death sparks calls for capital punishment

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

The killing of a 4-year-old girl prompted calls for the implementation of capital punishment in Algeria, which has not carried out a death sentence since 1993.

Thousands of Algerians marched behind the girl's coffin on August 7th, with many saying the government should bring back the death penalty. Mourners claim the girl was abducted, raped and killed. Authorities said they have not reached a conclusion about the case.

The girl's death rekindled debate between those against capital punishment and Islamists and other conservatives who insist the death penalty must be implemented to punish those who kill and rape, according to their interpretation of Islamic law. Algeria has not abolished the death penalty but has observed a moratorium on carrying out capital punishment since 1993.

The girl, Nihal Si Mohand, was reported missing July 21st from the village of Ait Abdelouahab, 60km from Algiers, where her family was attending a wedding. The case attracted widespread media coverage, especially by private television stations that reported that the girl was kidnapped, abused and killed by one or more people.

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The government deployed more than 2,500 paramilitary gendarmes and police officers to investigate the death. They found bones and tufts of hair scattered over a 4 sq. km area near the village.

Colonel Mohamed Tirghini, the National Gendarmerie spokesman, said authorities would spare no effort in their investigation, even if they had to question all 400 residents of the village.

"The death of the small girl Nihal traumatised public opinion. Never has such a tragedy provoked such a shock and especially a wave of anger and wide indignation," wrote the leading French-language daily

El Watan.

El Khabar daily reported that "hundreds of thousands" thronged the cemetery in Ain Beida district outside the western city of Oran, where the girl's family lives, chanting, "we will sacrifice our blood and souls for you, Nihal". The imam overseeing the burial ritual urged the crowd to be calm out of respect for the dead.

Parliament member Mohamed Mehdi Kasemi wrote a letter urging President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to organise a referendum "on implementing the death penalty against criminals convicted of murder".

"I want to inform you about the fate of the girl Nihal and before her the death of Ibrahim, Souaieb, Yasser, Haroune, Chaïma, Soundes, and the list of victims is long," he added alluding to other children killed after being abducted.

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"I also want to let you know about the impact of such an incident as well as previous ones on the feelings of the society members across the country," he said.

"You have heard the voices of honourable free people who expressed anger and repulsion against such gruesome crimes calling the death sentences to be enacted against these criminals."

He assailed a "small minority" of rights activists who are against the death penalty.

"We do not know what kind of human beings they are defending? What must come first, the rights of the innocent victims or the rights of criminal murderers?" he asked.

"It is not wise to take a decision on such an issue under the pressures of angry people following such an abominable crime," said Noureddine Benissad, chairman of the independent Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights.

Benissad said executions of rapists and other criminals were no deterrent against crime as evidenced by countries such as the United States.

"Unfortunately, the death of Nihal is added to the long list of children kidnapped and killed since 2012. These hands that strike at any moment have no colour and no reasoning. It is part of rise of criminality in the country," said

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Abderrahmane Arar, who heads the civic association Nada for the defence of children's rights.

Tunisia was rattled in May by the kidnapping and death of a 4-year-

old boy by a young man in the working-class district of Melassine in Tunis. The crime prompted calls by Islamists and conservatives, including parliament members, to

implement death sentences, which were last carried out there in 1994.

Lamine Ghanmi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.

When a Morocco governor buys state land for \$36 per sq. metre

Saad Guerraoui

Casablanca

The government sale of a parcel of state land to Rabat Governor Abdelouafi Laftit at a very low price has angered Moroccans, civil society activists and opposition members who called for an investigation into similar acquisitions made by civil servants.

According to the news website Lakome2, parcels of 3,000-5,000 sq. metres were sold to senior government officials and civil servants at low prices.

The election campaign is to officially start September 24th and run until the eve of October 7th parliamentary elections.

Lawmaker Mehdi Mezouari, from the leftist Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), posted on Facebook notarial documents showing Laftit's acquisition in January of land in Ra-

bat's upmarket area of Zaer Road. The 3,750 sq. metre parcel, which was owned by the government, was sold to Laftit for \$36 per sq. metre but is estimated to be valued at \$2,600-\$3,125 per sq. metre.

"I'm asking the prime minister to give us more information on the issue and the government's responsibility in this abuse," wrote Mezouari on Facebook.

Interior Minister Mohamed Hassad and Minister of Economy and Finance Mohamed Boussaid issued a statement stating that "this land has been part of a residential development for government officials and civil servants" since late King Hassan II's era.

"The price of the plots of land is defined by a decree of the prime minister, dated December 26th, 1995," said the statement.

They denounced what they called "a tendentious campaign led by a political party and media that favour it", referring to Moroccan Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane's Justice and Development Party (PJD), which leads the coalition government.

"It has become clear, if necessary, that it is a premature election

campaign that seeks to reap skimpy electoral gains under the pretext of implementing the rules of good governance and avoid conflict between personal interests and public responsibilities," added the statement.

Independent news website Hesperess released documents revealing that the two ministers acquired plots of 4,630 sq. metres and 3,181 sq. metres at \$36 and \$38 per sq. metre, respectively.



Rabat Governor Abdelouafi Laftit

Benkirane reportedly asked party's activists to "refrain from commenting on the statement of the two ministers" in an unusual sign of restraint.

Secretary-General of the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) Nabila Mounib told Lakome2 that this problem "is not new because Morocco adopts a patrimonial regime that relies on various benefits and privileges to reward people close to the authorities".

The case sparked outrage among civil society activists and opposition members who called for an inquiry. Questions were raised about the timing of the leak just two months before legislative elections.

Secretary-General of the Moroccan Liberal Party (PML) Mohammed Ziane told Article19.ma that the controversy was because "we are in an electoral period and we want to play democracy the French way without having the same political parties, institutions, values and political awareness."

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Ziane called on all Moroccans to address requests to the government to benefit, in accordance with constitutional provisions, from parcels of land at a fair price to stop land speculation.

He also questioned Benkirane's silence on the matter. "What's the role of a head of government if he keeps quiet?" asked Ziane.

Saad Guerraoui is a frequent contributor to The Arab Weekly on Maghreb issues.