

Christians in Libya uneasy about move to Shari'a law

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [February 5, 2014](#) issue

Church leaders in Libya remain hopeful that Christians in the mostly Muslim country will be allowed to practice their faith, even as the country appears to be moving toward Shari'a law.

In December, Libya's General National Congress voted to make Shari'a the source of all legislation and institutions. The vote came amid international concerns over the diminishing Christian populations in North Africa and the Middle East and increased Islamist influence in countries engulfed by the Arab Spring revolution.

Libya has undergone a two-year transition since 2011, when demonstrations toppled Muammar Qaddafi. Before the revolution, Christians were granted religious freedom, but with the change of power, they have been arbitrarily arrested, attacked, killed and forced by Islamist groups to convert to Islam.

In September, two Christians were killed in the Derna District of northeastern Libya after they refused forced conversion. St. Mark's Coptic Church in Benghazi was attacked twice in 2013, according to the Barnabas Fund, a British charity supporting Christians in Muslim-majority countries.

A prominent group, Ansar al-Sharia, which is linked to the September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, has accused some lawmakers of being un-Islamic.

But as a special committee embarked on reviewing the nation's laws, Celso Larracas, a priest at St. Francis Catholic Church in Tripoli, said only a small number of Libyans are pushing for Shari'a. "They are insisting on it, but I think many Libyans want to coexist with foreigners," Larracas said.

Libya's Christian population is composed mainly of foreigners working in the country. It has a small indigenous Christian community as well. There were about 300,000 Coptic Christians and 80,000 Roman Catholics before the fall of Qaddafi. There are also an unknown number of Anglicans and Pentecostals. Christian groups run

hospitals and education centers open to all faiths. Although Christians face attacks, Libya relies on their professional expertise. —RNS