

Ramadan: Protests after Tunisia jails five men for 'indecentcy' after they ate during day

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Government upholds role as 'guardian of religion' after public outcry.

Dozens of people have gathered in the capital of Tunisia to protest for the right not to fast during Ramadan, following the arrests of several abstainers.

Demonstrators from the group Mouch Bessif, meaning 'not against our will' in Arabic, held a peaceful protest in the central square in Tunis, asking the country's government to relax its stance on those who decline to observe the fast.

At the start of June, four men were given one-month jail sentences after police found them eating in a public garden in northern Tunisia during daylight hours, with the local prosecutor accusing them of engaging in "a provocative act of public indecentcy".

The following week, another man received a short prison sentence for smoking a cigarette outside during the day.

Tunisia has no law banning eating or drinking in public during Ramadan, but the state has a constitutional role as a "guardian of religion", which it used to justify the arrests.

The protesters argued that the constitution is also meant to protect the "freedom of belief and conscience" and that these values were being eroded by government control over Ramadan.

One protester smoking a cigarette held a placard asking: "Why does it bother you if you fast and I eat?" It is not known whether he was the man who was later jailed.

"I fast but I came to join this protest and call with these people for respect for the freedom of belief and conscience," said Kamel Jalouli, another demonstrator, told AFP.

Most restaurants and coffee shops remain shut in Tunisia during daylight hours over the holy month, but some establishments open behind closed curtains to prevent customers being seen.

As this year's fast began, a Tunisian preacher posted clips on social media of people eating in cafes during daylight in an attempt to publicly shame them.

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P.S.

* The Independent Online. Tuesday 13 June 2017 14:07 BST:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ramadan-tunisia-protests-five-jailed-men-failing-observe-muslim-holiday-islam-a7787381.html>