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TAJIKISTAN: Hijab ban and state-written sermons "only a recommendation"?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Women were being stopped at kindergartens in March to be told that they should not drop off their children while wearing a hijab, one source told Forum 18 News Service. "We have received so many phone calls during the last week from women in various places in Dushanbe and outside that they were stopped on the street by officials and warned that they must not wear the hijab," Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) told Forum 18. Despite this – and statements from Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon against women wearing "uncharacteristic" dress - a State Committee for Religious Affairs official claimed to Forum 18 that "no one ever banned the hijab or spoke against it". The same official denied to Forum 18 that imams were required to read state-produced sermons at Friday prayers, one before parliamentary elections backing the ruling party and one afterwards calling for the IRP to be closed down. Orders to imams to read out such sermons are "not compulsory but only a recommendation", the official also claimed.

A senior official of the government's State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) has denied the existence of a state campaign against women wearing the Islamic headscarf, the hijab, which was launched by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon in early March. "I have not heard of any groups of officials going in public places anywhere in Tajikistan to speak against the hijab," Solehjon Zavkiyev, SCRA Deputy Chair in charge of Mosque affairs, claimed to Forum 18 News Service from the capital Dushanbe on 31 March. "It's true that we would like our women to wear Tajikistan's traditional religious dress, but no one ever banned the hijab or spoke against it."

Officials have not stated why people are not free to wear the clothing of their choice, whether or not inspired by their faith, nor why government restrictions on clothing are applied only to women.

Concerns have also been raised by the requirement that imams of state-backed mosques read sermons at Friday prayers issued and distributed by the state authorities (see below).

Stopped at the kindergarten gate

Women were being stopped at kindergartens in March to be told that they should not drop off their children while wearing a hijab, sources who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 that month.

"We have received so many phone calls during the last week from women in various places in Dushanbe and outside that they were stopped on the street by officials and warned that they must not wear the hijab," Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 1 April.

Muzaffar Olimov, an expert of Sharq (Orient) sociological and political research centre in Dushanbe, also confirmed to Forum 18 the authorities' efforts against the hijab, at least in the country's two biggest cities, the capital Dushanbe and Khujand in the north. "I know of such attempts by the local Administrations in Dushanbe and Khujand," he told Forum 18 on 30 March. "But I am not aware that there is a widescale campaign across the country."

President launches campaign

The authorities' campaign against women wearing the hijab appears to have been launched by President Rahmon on 6 March, ahead of the 8 March official mothers' day holiday. He told a meeting with women of Dushanbe of his concern that "women and girls have appeared in society who wear black dresses uncharacteristic of Tajik culture and traditions," according to the text of his speech on the presidential website. He stated that some women wear such dresses "with the purpose to propagate radical ideas, and cultivate this fashion in our women and girls".

Although President Rahmon did not specifically mention hijabs, it was clear that this was the type of clothing he had in mind, Forum 18 notes.

Soon after the President's speech, state television showed footage of police stopping ten women in hijabs on the street, claiming they were prostitutes.

The Heads of Administrations of the cities of Dushanbe, Mahmadsaid Uboydulloev, and Khujand, Radjaboi Ahmadzoda, issued decrees on 27 March obliging their cities' authorities to work among women to prevent them from wearing hijabs, as well as warning vendors not to sell them.

An "operational" meeting of the Police at the Interior Ministry in Dushanbe was held on 28 March to follow up on the President's orders to counter the wearing of "alien clothing" by women, according to the Interior Ministry website. Deputy Interior Minister Alamshozoda Abdurahmon Alamsho complained of "propaganda to wear alien clothing among the female population in several regions of the country". Local police chiefs reported to the meeting on work in their area to carry out the President's orders.

Dushanbe City Administration officials refused to discuss the anti-hijab campaign with Forum 18 on 30 March.

Makhmudjon Dadoboyev, Press Secretary of Khujand City Administration, explained to Forum 18 on 31 March that Ahmadzoda's decree ordered groups of officials to "work among the population to propagate Tajikistan's traditional dress. And yes, they explain that the hijab is not traditional dress, but so far wearing the hijab is not banned." He claimed that "what officials tell people about the hijab is only a recommendation."

What will happen to those who continue to sell or wear hijabs?

Asked what will happen to those who ignore the authorities' instructions and continue selling or wearing hijabs or what measures the authorities will take in future, Dadoboyev of Khujand City Administration replied: "We have not thought about it, and I do not know what will be done about it."

Zavkiyev of the SCRA claimed that "women in Tajikistan are free to wear hijab, since there is no ban on it." He did not tell Forum 18 what measures the authorities will take against those who continue to sell or wear hijabs.

However, Sayfullozoda of the IRP expressed his concern. "The authorities are warning people now, but in the near future they will begin handing down punishments."

Two sermons with one target

Meanwhile, around the time of the 1 March Parliamentary elections, officials ordered imams in mosques throughout the country to read out two election texts attacking an opposition political party and praising the government.

On 27 February, the sermon apparently prepared by the SCRA was read – or at least partly read - during Friday prayers in Central Mosques. The text attacked the opposition IRP, praised President Rahmon and his People's Democratic Party (PDPT), and called on Muslims to vote only for candidates from Rahmon's Party.

After the elections – which were neither free nor fair – another SCRA written sermon called for the IRP to be closed down and for there to be only one party in the country.

The IRP is Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

The government has in recent years increased state control and repression of Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) is allowed to operate, all others having been closed. An imam fired by the SCRA in July 2013 remains unemployed, and in February 2014 the SCRA ordered sermons on one topic to be preached in every mosque where preaching is permitted by the state. Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It was a decision of the Council of Ulems", he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it" (see F18News 3 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1933).

"We have to vote for those whose work has achieved results"

"We have to vote for those whose work has achieved results", Eurasianet on 27 February quoted the three-page sermon delivered that day (and seen by Forum 18) as saying. "May God protect our head of state, who has devoted himself to saving our nation and delivering us from our troubles." Without naming the IRP but in comments clearly understood in Tajikistan as directly attacking it, the text claimed: "Is it not this party that divided people?" It went on to claim that the IRP intends to restart the civil war that ended in 1997.

The Social-Democratic Party complained that "sermons delivered on 27 February by the state-funded Islamic Centre, criticising the

IRPT and promoting the PDPT, compromised the secular nature of the state", an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission noted.

The government "boasts that it is a democratic and secular state", Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18. But, he asked, "where is the democracy and secularism when the state interferes in religious affairs, and dictates to mosques what to preach on?"

"An honest count could not be guaranteed"

The OSCE Election Observation Mission found that: "the 1 March parliamentary elections took place in a restricted political space and failed to provide a level playing field for candidates (...) restrictions on the right to stand, freedoms of expression and assembly, and access to media limited the opportunity to make a free and informed choice. The elections were not administered in an impartial manner (...) significant shortcomings were noted, including multiple voting and ballot box stuffing. The disregard of counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed".

Civil society organisations, even those not working on overtly political issues, spoke to a human rights defender known to Forum 18 of a climate of fear before the elections.

President Rahmon's PDPT has 51 out of the total of 63 deputies in the new parliament and the IRP has no deputies.

"Let there be only one effective party"

Four weeks later on 27 March, also during Friday prayers, another pre-written SCRA sermon was read in mosques across the country. The text Forum 18 has seen claims the 1 March elections showed overwhelming support for Rahmon's party, attacks the IRP as a threat to society, and encourages Muslims to call on the central government to initiate a referendum to close the IRP down. The text states "let there be only one effective party in Tajikistan".

Unlike the 27 February sermon, which was unsigned, the 27 March sermon was signed by Abdurahmon Mavlanov, who is thought to work for the SCRA.

"Many central mosques across Tajikistan just read the preamble of the letter, where the name of our Party is not given explicitly," Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18. But, he continued, "several central mosques in Dushanbe and in Sogd Region, including two mosques in Khujand, read the whole letter".

Government officials in the municipal administrations of Khujand and Istaravshan District in Sogd Region refused to comment to Forum 18 on either of the recent pre-written sermon texts.

"Fake" SCRA sermons?

"Pre-written sermons are prepared by the Islamic Centre [the state-backed body controlling Islam in the country]," SCRA Deputy Chair in charge of work with mosques Zavkiyev claimed to Forum 18. "This is normal policy in many major Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia." However, he insisted that the texts it and other human rights and media organisations have seen are "fake". "The real sermons did not include any support for the President or his Party, or attack the IRP."

Zavkiyev of the SCRA would not state whether Mavlanov also works for the SCRA. But Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18 that "we know that Mavlanov works for the SCRA. Our members and other people who have listened to these sermons in mosques have told us about this". The IRP had sight of the SCRA-prepared 27 March sermon – which as is usual attempts to disguise its origin by not using the SCRA letterhead – before it was read in mosques. For fear of state reprisals he could not reveal the source that supplied the sermon, but was confident that it is reliable.

Deputy Grand Mufti Haji Nigmatullo Olimov and other officials of the state-backed Council of Ulems and Islamic Centre declined to discuss the sermons with Forum 18 on 31 March. Deputy Grand Mufti Olimov has previously denied that imams cannot preach their own sermons and must deliver pre-written texts from the Council of Ulems (see F18News 3 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1933).

"It is not surprising that imams in central mosques read the sermons," Olimov of the Sharq research centre commented to Forum 18. "The imams of the 365 central mosques across Tajikistan receive salaries from the government. They are expected by the government to carry out the government's policy." He also noted that the Sharq Centre's research had found that over 70 per cent of the population saw no threat to the country from the IRP.

Consequences for imams who refuse to read SCRA texts

Zakiyev of the SCRA claimed that orders to imams to read out sermons are "not compulsory but only a recommendation". Asked whether there are any punishments or other consequences for imams who refuse to read the pre-written sermons, he claimed:

"Imams are also free to prepare their own sermons".

However, Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18 that he knows of imams who have been fired for refusing to read pre-written sermons. One example he gave was Imam Khodji Mirzo Ibronov of the Central Mosque in Kulob in the south west of the country.

Ubaydullo Khasanov, who was Chief Imam in Vossei District of the south-western Khatlon Region, was dismissed on the SCRA's instructions for allegedly giving "false information to the President" (see F18News 3 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1933).

The state-backed Council of Ulems appoints imams, increasing the state's control of imams (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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