

2 August 2017

TAJIKISTAN: Fines, questioning, threats for wearing hijab

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Officials this spring launched a massive renewed campaign against women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). Victims and human rights defenders complain that women have been questioned, threatened and fined, as have some husbands. Some have lost their jobs or been forced to leave school.

Since late spring, the authorities - particularly in the capital Dushanbe and Khujand, central City of the northern Sogd Region - have been carrying out a massive renewed campaign against women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf).

Working groups - which included Police, employees of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and officials of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) - raided bazaars and public places to reveal those who wear the hijab to punish them. Such raids were publicised in the local media and on State TV Jahonnamo in mid-July.

In mid-July President Emomali Rahmon and other officials made public statements against wearing the hijab and beards. The campaign became "more energised" after those statements, according to human rights defenders. And "it still goes on," as one human rights defender pointed out.

Women wearing the hijab were punished with fines and in some cases their husbands were questioned and held in police custody. Other women were threatened with punishments unless they stop wearing the hijab, while some were forced to take it off in public places. At least one was "humiliated" during police questioning, as the victim told human rights defenders. Still others lost their jobs.

A Muslim woman, one of the victims and several human rights defenders, who all for fear of state reprisals asked not to be named, complained to Forum 18 in July about such harassment (see below).

Officials denied to Forum 18 that anyone had been harassed or claimed the raids were merely an "awareness campaign" (see below).

"Total control of Muslim activity"

President Rahmon has been attacking women wearing the hijab as well as men wearing beards from at least March 2015 (see Forum's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

In recent years, the authorities have tightened the already strict control of Muslims who exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief. The authorities have demolished or closed down hundreds of prayer rooms and mosques in Dushanbe. Young activists have been placed in mosques as volunteers to help law-enforcement agencies catch "extremists", as well as those who do not pray according to Hanafi or Ismaili traditions. The authorities have installed surveillance cameras and metal detectors in mosques. In 2015 the authorities banned state employees from attending Friday prayers and sermons, even during their lunch hour. One human rights defender described the state's aim to Forum 18 in 2016 as to "establish total control of Muslim activity" (see F18News 6 May 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2175>).

Six months' imprisonment for filming hijab harassment

Okil Sharipov was arrested in Isfara in Sogd Region in late February 2016 for filming police harassment of women for wearing the hijab (see F18News 26 April 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2172>).

Judge Rustam Yunuszoda of Isfara City Court handed Sharipov a one-year prison sentence on 26 May 2016, his lawyer Faizinisso Vokhidova told Forum 18 on 1 August 2017. The authorities amnestied Sharipov and released him from prison in late August 2016 after six months' imprisonment.

"Allah can be perceived by intellect not by hijab, turban or beard"

On 11 July, at a meeting marking the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Law on Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and

Rituals with representatives of state and public organisations, President Rahmon spoke against hijabs and other religious apparel not traditional in Tajikistan, as well as against long beards.

Radio Free Europe reported Rahmon warning in the same meeting that some women "wearing black and dark apparel (...) trample on the values of our traditional culture and darken the spiritual space of our society." He was reported saying that "Allah can be perceived by the intellect not by the hijab, turban or beard."

Rahmon warned that extremist religious movements in Tajikistan "emerged because of bowing before and imitation of foreign language and culture".

Also speaking against the hijab and non-traditional religious apparel on 15 July in a meeting of the Health Ministry was Minister Nasim Olimzoda. He spoke on the need to create permanent committees in healthcare institutions to monitor employees to ensure that they do not wear the hijab.

Fotima Ghoyibova, Press-Secretary of the Ministry, declined to comment on Minister Olimzoda's statement. "I don't know when the Minister spoke on this," she claimed on 1 August. Told that many news agencies reported on this, she asked Forum 18 to send written questions through the Foreign Ministry.

The Interior Ministry noted on its website in January 2016 that in 2015 in Khatlon Region alone the authorities "forcibly shaved beards of thirteen thousand men. Authorities also closed down 162 shops selling hijabs," according to the local media.

Shankhaibazaar raid in Dushanbe

State TV channel Jahonnamo broadcast on 19 July the authorities' anti-hijab raid in Dushanbe's open-air market Shankhaibazaar, which was also reported by local news agency Asiplus. As reported by it and in the video material of Jahonnamo TV, seen by Forum 18, Makhbuba Azimova, Press-Secretary of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, spoke against the hijab in her television interview. She and her co-employees from the Committee were shown stopping women in the hijab and convincing them against wearing it. They also warned those who sold and bought non-traditional religious apparel in the bazaar.

Raids in Sogd

Working groups created by the Sogd Department of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs in early July raided all the Districts, shopping centres, bazaars, sewing workshops, restaurants, healthcare institutions, schools, and kindergartens to reveal those wear hijab and to give lectures against wearing it, local news agencies reported. The working groups reportedly included Police officials, State healthcare and education institutions and state religious affairs officials.

Nodira Mirzozoda, Chair of the Sogd Department who personally participated in the raids, adamantly denied to Forum 18 that the working groups campaigned against the hijab. "We only asked women about their problems and spoke to them on family issues, but not the hijab," she claimed to Forum 18 on 19 July. "This issue is in the competence of other authorities, not us."

When Forum 18 told her it has seen the raid of the Dushanbe bazaar by her State Committee broadcast by State TV and of the media reports of the anti-hijab working groups created by her Department, Mirzozoda declined to discuss the issue further. "Please, send your further questions in writing."

Sogd Regional Police's Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, Mashraf Islomzoda, declined to comment on the raids and violations by the Police. "I am not competent on this issue, please talk to the Chief of Police," he told Forum 18 on 1 August. "Other staff are involved in this issue." Phones of the Chief of Sogd Police went unanswered on 1 August.

Police "humiliate" woman during questioning, another's husband held for three days

The husbands of two victims, "Zulola" and "Volda" (not their real names to protect their security), were summoned to Khujand City Police Station questioned, one human rights defender complained to Forum 18.

In Zulola's case, "both she and her husband were summoned to the Police Station and questioned separately. Each was questioned for between three and four hours." Zulola told the human rights defender that she "felt humiliated" during the Police questioning. After the incident Zulola "changed her dress and head cover style."

Volda's husband was questioned as to why his wife wore the hijab and was kept in custody for three days after the questioning.

Fined for granddaughter's hijab

One seventy-year-old woman was fined 2,000 Somonis (1,800 Norwegian Kroner, 190 Euros or 230 US Dollars) because her granddaughter wears the hijab, a human rights defender told Forum 18.

Gave up wearing hijab after being fined

In another case, two related women "gave up wearing the hijab" since the authorities fined each of them approximately 900 Somonis, the human rights defender told Forum 18. "It is easier not to wear the hijab than to get into trouble with the police and pay such heavy fines," the women explained to the human rights defender.

Forced on street to take off hijab

A Muslim woman from Khujand, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained that she was discriminated against for wearing the hijab. In May, Police officers barred her from entering the city's circus. "Officers insisted that I take off my hijab or else they will call for duty officers to take me to the Police Station," she told Forum 18 on 27 July. The woman managed to evade the pressure and remained at the circus.

The woman also told Forum 18 that on a separate occasion while she was walking on the street, two women, who introduced themselves as Police officers, who were "dressed in European style dress, stopped me to ask why I wore not a traditional Tajik dress and head cover but a foreign one in ignorance of the officials' public statements." She said that "When I told them that it is my right and that the Law does not prohibit it, they told me that I violate the Law since the Chief of Sogd Police had publicly announced that women must not wear the hijab."

When the woman asked the police officers to tell her exactly what law prohibits wearing the hijab, they could not answer. "They wanted to write down my name and address but I walked away."

Police harass Madina on the street and force her to take off hijab

Police stopped 24-year-old Madina on the street demanding that she take off her hijab, one human rights defender told Forum 18. When she refused to do so, "the police officers very rudely demanded that she must take it off right on the spot. She was scared and took it off." The human rights defender lamented that while telling them this Madina cried "and said that she never felt so humiliated before."

The officers also filmed it, and warned Madina that if she continues to wear the hijab they will share the film on the internet and broadcast it on television.

Forced to leave job

Makhrifat, a 58-year-old street vendor in Khujand, was forced to hire somebody else to run her shop because of the pressure of the authorities to take off her hijab. "Last year Police checked up on her in her shop numerous times, demanding her that she take off her hijab," one human rights defender complained to Forum 18. "Finally they threatened her that the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police will deal with her now."

Makhrifat complained to various State organs, including the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, but with no success. "She was told that she must take off her hijab." She felt that she had no choice but to hire somebody else for her shop.

Lost her job, cannot find employment but official pressure continues

Khujand resident Karomat, who is over forty, also had to leave her job in about 2011 because she was pressured to take off her hijab. "She could not find employment with her higher education because she wears the hijab." However, the authorities still pressure her. "In the beginning of June, police stopped her at the market and wrote down her name and details. The authorities then visited her home several times until very recently, demanding that she take off her hijab."

During the last two police raids on her flat, officers "banged on her door when she decided not to open it." The last time officials sent her a message through her neighbours that she must come to the local Police Station. Karomat "decided through consultation with a lawyer that she will not visit the Police without a written summons." She refuses to take off her hijab "because it is her elementary human right".

Schoolgirl forced to leave school

Malika is unemployed and has two daughters aged 15 and 16. All three wear the hijab. During a police raid on their home, officers asked her "how could they stoop so low as to wear the hijab", a human rights defender complained to Forum 18. "After they lectured her on the hijab, the officers warned that her husband will have trouble with the authorities unless they stop wearing it."

After the July public statements by President Rahmon and other officials, Malika was summoned along with other parents to the school. Staff there demanded that she "take the hijabs off her daughters." Malika "had to take her oldest daughter out of the school."

Barred from entering park in hijab

Sitora, a married woman with children, was stopped in a market place in Khujand for wearing the hijab. Police and representatives of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs took her to her home. The officials "lectured her mother to convince her daughter not to wear the hijab before leaving".

After that, Police stopped her again while she was entering a park in the city. Officers told her that she "cannot enter the park unless she takes off the hijab." Sitora did not take off her scarf and had to enter the park later.

"Vigorous fight against Islam"

Human rights defenders have condemned the anti-hijab and anti-beard campaign to Forum 18. "It is a flagrant violation of women's fundamental human right, their discrimination and utter disrespect to them," one human rights defender complained to Forum 18. "As a rule those who wear the hijab or beards are practicing Muslims. In reality, the worst thing is that under propaganda against the hijab and beards and by these campaigns and raids, the authorities are conducting a vigorous fight against Islam."

Idigul Kosimzoda, Chair of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, confirmed the raids to hunt for women wearing hijabs but declined to comment. "Working groups were established by the SCRA, and [Makhbuba] Azimova [the Committee Press-Secretary] was included in it. Please talk to the SCRA," she told Forum 18 on 1 August.

Told that Azimova, as well as employees of Sogd Regional Department of the Committee, who participated in the raids in Dushanbe and Khujand, are subordinate to her, Forum 18 asked why she endorsed the raids. "I am very busy with people in my office, please talk to the SCRA," she responded. She declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Khuseyn Shokirov of the SCRA claimed to Forum 18 on 1 August that his Committee was "not involved" in the raids. "I am surprised that Kosimzoda asked you to talk to us." Asked if the SCRA approves the raids, he evaded the question. "We are not against women wearing the hijab, but we encourage our women to wear our traditional costumes. Those in Africa or in Saudi Arabia do not wear Tajik head coverings or dresses, so why should we dress like them?"

Told about the violations against the Muslim women and raids since late spring, and asked why the State Committee was not concerned and raised the issue with higher authorities, Shokirov responded: "No one complained to us."

Why Police raids against hijab and harassment of women and their families?

Asked why the Interior Minister is involved in raids against women in the hijab, and Police harassed women and their husbands, the Ministry referred Forum 18 on 2 August to Zumrad Abdullozoda, Chief of the International Relations Section. Abdullozoda wrote down Forum 18's questions but then declared: "Other Ministry officials are overseeing that issue." She promised to seek the answers from those officials and asked Forum 18 to call back. Subsequent calls on the same day went unanswered.

Colonel Raimjon Abduvaliyev, Chief of Staff of Sogd Regional Police, defended the raids on women wearing the hijab. Asked if he does not think the Police violate the women's fundamental human rights, he told Forum 18 on 2 August: "We are only talking to women on the streets to explain them that it is better to wear our own national dress and head cover instead of foreign ones." Asked why the Police should be involved in the anti-hijab campaign, Colonel Abduvaliyev claimed: "It is only an awareness campaign."

Told about the cases of abuse by the police of women wearing the hijab, Colonel Abduvaliyev denied it. "That is a lie, a provocation." Told that Forum 18 received detailed complaints on numerous cases, and asked whether he thinks all those women and the human rights defenders are lying, he responded: "Why didn't they complain to us?"

Forum 18 told Abduvaliyev that the women are afraid to complain. "Those are the people who want to destabilise Tajikistan," he responded. "They must have done something wrong that they are afraid to complain."

Colonel Emin Jalilov, Chief of Khujand City Police, denied any police involvement in the raids. Asked on 2 August why Police in Khujand harassed women wearing the hijab on the street, why Police took women and their husbands to his Police Station, why it kept in custody husbands of some, he claimed to Forum 18: "I know of no such cases." He then claimed he was "not competent" to talk further and referred Forum 18 to the Interior Ministry. (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=2138.

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://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>>.

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