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TAJIKISTAN: Hijab-wearing and beards ban continues

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Tajikistan continues beard and hijab-wearing bans, and has forced one couple to divorce. Police set up a roadblock to enforce the bans, which are also been enforced in schools and universities. Officials have refused to give Forum 18 a legal reason for the bans.

Under repeated pressure from the authorities, a man in Tajikistan's northern Sogd Region divorced his wife in 2017 after seven years of marriage. Police had repeatedly summoned him, demanding that he stop his wife, a devout Muslim, from wearing the hijab. Under great pressure from police, the woman's husband kicked her out of their house and also began to publicly insult her.

"A normal and happy family was forced to break up," human rights defender Faizinisso Vokhidova told Forum 18. "The woman refused to stop wearing the hijab because she has a strong faith. There are many such tragedies in Tajikistan. Many women are being pressured into stopping wearing the hijab, but they do not want to make their cases public as if they do so their life can become a real hell. They are afraid that they can be branded as terrorists and face prison" (see below)

Hijab-wearing women have also been refused employment and medical care. Asked why, the Health Ministry claimed to Forum 18 that it "is not responsible for hospitals" (see below).

On 28 September 2018 police put up a roadblock on the outskirts of the capital Dushanbe on the road from Vahdat, west of Dushanbe, to stop cars carrying men with beards and women with hijabs. Police forced men with beards into a barber's shop to have their beards shaved off, and women were forced to take off hijab and wear a shawl showing their necks (see below).

Universities are also enforcing the beard and hijab ban, and one university has also banned women from wearing a Tajik traditional shawl. Police in Dushanbe are also enforcing the ban with visits to schools (see below).

The Interior Ministry Press Secretary confirmed to Forum 18 that there is no law banning hijabs or beards, but refused to explain why the authorities try to ban them. No Education Ministry official, from the First Deputy Minister downwards, has been able to give a legal reason for the beard and hijab ban (see below).

And a beard-wearing former professional footballer has been arrested in Belarus under threat of extradition to Tajikistan. "We think that the authorities were angry that he stood for his religious beliefs and left his professional career," relatives told Forum 18. "We think that the authorities are worried that as he is well-known as a former professional footballer, other Tajik men may be inspired to follow his example" (see below).

"It is getting worse and worse"

Human rights defender Faizinisso Vokhidova and another human rights defender who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18: "Every week we hear stories of people being persecuted for beards and hijabs." Vokhidova added that "it is getting worse and worse in Tajikistan. People are afraid to speak about freedom of religion and belief, let alone exercise this freedom. It is like a return to Soviet times."

Authorities pressure husband into divorcing hijab-wearing wife

In 2000 a Muslim man and woman got married in the northern Sogd Region. The woman, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, was from a devout Muslim family and had worn a hijab since her childhood, human rights defender Faizinisso Vokhidova told Forum 18 on 4 October. The wedding took place under Islamic rites and "the family lived happily, in mutual understanding and love. They had three children born to them."

However, in 2016 Sogd Police stopped the woman on the street, took her to a police station, and demanded that she take off hijab. She refused, so "officials summoned her husband to the Police Station, where he was pressured into trying to persuade her to stop wearing the hijab", Vokhidova stated.

The regime's campaign to stop women wearing the hijab and men from having beards started in March 2015 with a speech by President Emomali Rahmon (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

Police began to "constantly summon the husband, and pressured him into trying to persuade his wife into stopping wearing the hijab," human rights defender Vokhidova stated. "Finally, in 2017 the husband broke down and divorced her. He also kicked her out of their house."

In early 2018, after the divorce and eviction from her home, the woman asked the local Guardianship Department of her District Administration for help to get child support from her husband. She also filed a court case to try to regain her rights to the flat. "Both the Guardianship Department and the Court unofficially told her lawyer that they can help her if she stops wearing the hijab," Vokhidova stated.

"Police brainwashed him"

Under great pressure from police, the woman's husband began to publicly insult her. "On the street he shouted that all women who wear the hijab use it to hide immoral acts and are prostitutes." This insult, made without any evidence, has been used by President Rahmon (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>). It is possible that the husband was pressured into using this insult publicly by police.

"This is shocking and shows how the police brainwashed him," human rights defender Vokhidova commented that. She sits home and is totally devoted to bringing up her children. He used to love and respect her before."

"There are many such tragedies"

Vokhidova told Forum 18 that "A normal and happy family was forced to break up. She refused to stop wearing the hijab because she has a strong faith. There are many such tragedies in Tajikistan. Many women are being pressured into stopping wearing the hijab, but they do not want to make their cases public as if they do so their life can become a real hell. They are afraid that they can be branded as terrorists and face prison."

The authorities have jailed Muslims, a Protestant pastor, and a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector to military service for their exercise of freedom of religion and belief (see eg. F18News 4 December 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2336>).

Alleged "terrorism" was used as an excuse for January 2018 Religion Law changes allowing the state to restrict freedom of religion or belief on illegitimate grounds, increase religious communities' reporting obligations, require state approval for all imams, and increase state control on religious education (see F18News 19 February 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2354>).

Hijab-wearing women refused employment, medical care.

A graduate of Tajik National University, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 3 October that "as soon as employers saw me in a hijab when I came for interview, they would reject me".

Officials of the Labour, Migration and Employment Ministry repeatedly on 4 October refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18. "According to the official dress code of the Ministry it is not possible to employ such women," Narzullo Mirzoaliyev, Head of the Personnel Department of the Health Ministry, told Forum 18 on 4 October. Asked why the dress code does not allow this, he refused to answer.

The woman also said that "once in a state hospital I was not allowed to see a doctor because I refused to take off my hijab." Asked why this could be, Mirzoaliyev of the Ministry of Health replied that the Ministry "is not responsible for hospitals". He then refused to talk more to Forum 18.

Beards and hijabs roadblock

On 28 September police put up a roadblock on the outskirts of Dushanbe on the road from Vahdat, west of Dushanbe, to stop cars carrying men with beards and women with hijabs. A video of the roadblock seen by Forum 18 shows police officers forcing men with beards into a barber's shop to have their beards shaved off, and women being forced to take off hijab and wear a shawl showing their necks.

Dushanbe police chief Sharif Nazarzoda claimed on 3 October that he could only talk to Forum 18 if he was given permission by the Interior Ministry.

Interior Ministry Press Secretary Umarjon Emomali denied that police and other officials order people to stop wearing the hijab and shave off beards. "This is not true," he claimed to Forum 18 on 3 October, "you will see that people in beards and hijabs walk freely on our streets".

However, in October 2017 Emomali admitted there was such pressure, telling Forum 18 that "We want to be a developed country, we don't want visiting guests to have the wrong impression of us as untidy people". Asked what this has to do with being a developed country, he replied that "we are not against beards but they need to look more cultured and well-groomed" (see F18News 20 October 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2327>).

"Is Tajikistan ruled by law"?

Asked about the roadblock specifically, Emomali of the Interior Ministry claimed that "there is no law in Tajikistan banning hijab or beards but we have our own Muslim traditions and national dresses. The police only explain to people on the streets that they need to respect our culture and not follow foreign traditions and culture". He then claimed that "men in beards do not look civilised and scare children". Asked whether Tajikistan is ruled by laws or traditions replied: "By laws that respect traditions".

When Forum 18 pointed out that he himself had confirmed that no law bans hijabs or beards, and asked why the authorities try to ban them, Emomali refused to answer.

University bans traditional shawl - and denies this..

Tajik State Pedagogical University in Dushanbe announced on 30 September that female students cannot attend lectures wearing a traditional Tajik shawl covering the head. Statements announcing this from Mirzabek Sharipov, Dean of the Biology Faculty, were widely reported by Tajik news agencies such as akhbor.com.

Human rights defender Vokhidova thought this new ban could be because wearing the shawl could be associated with being Muslim.

Faculty Dean Sharipov denied the ban, insisting to Forum 18 that female students can attend universities in a shawl. He claimed of his published statement that "I never said those things".

..and universities continue to ban hijabs and beards - and deny this

Sharipov also insisted that women can attend universities in a hijab, claiming "absolutely they can." However, Akobir Karimov, Dean of the Biology Faculty of Tajikistan National University in Dushanbe contradicted Sharipov. "Women are absolutely not allowed to wear hijab to universities, it is against our traditions," he told Forum 18 on 3 October. Asked whether men in beards are allowed to attend lectures, he replied "no, they are not allowed". Asked whether short beards are allowed he replied that "no beards allowed short or long. We are not a mosque."

Asked what legal basis there is for this, Karimov replied: "There is no law or decree, but there are recommendations by the Education Ministry on types of dress for universities and secondary schools".

Asked why students wearing hijabs or beards are not allowed to attend lectures, Biology Dean Karimov replied: "Because the Ministry does not allow this, and it is against our traditions." Asked whether Tajikistan is run by traditions, he replied "Why are you asking me these questions?"

Police enforce hijab and beards ban in schools

Human rights defender Vokhidova and other human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that police have started to visit schools in Dushanbe to enforce the hijab ban on pupils between the ages of 6 and 18. On 27 September Radio Free Europe (RFE) reported Dushanbe police chief Nazarzoda telling Dushanbe school headteachers "that city authorities ordered 500 police officers to patrol 140 secondary schools on Thursdays".

A family in Dushanbe, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 3 October that their daughter takes her hijab off several hundred meters away from her school. The daughter does this because the family does not want to get into trouble with the authorities.

School headteachers were warned that if they do not inform the authorities of violations by pupils, they will be punished, RFE reported. Headteachers in the meeting with Police Chief Nazarzoda were warned that "during the last three years, courts punished 6,000 teachers for violations by pupils, and several headteachers were dismissed from their jobs".

An unnamed headteacher of a Dushanbe school told RFE that teachers are afraid that police interference in schools will increase. "Some officers ask about the school curriculum or read class journals, which is not within their competence," one was quoted as saying.

Press Secretary Emomali of the Interior Ministry claimed to Forum 18 that "this is not something new. Police used to visit schools occasionally, but now they will visit regularly." He stated that among other things police will make sure that girls do not come to school in a hijab, and that children are not involved in religious activity instead of attending school.

State restrictions on the freedom of religion and belief of teachers and pupils have been increasing. On 1 September 2017 teachers were banned from attending a mosque on Muslim festival Id al-Adha. They and children were forced to attend school, even though the state had declared the festival a public holiday. Officials also banned haj pilgrimage returnees from holding celebratory meals, and Traditions Law amendments and increased punishments have come into force (see F18News 12 September 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2315>).

Asked why police have started such school visits, Emomali claimed that police have to do this to enforce the Parental Responsibility Law (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

Ministry of Education unable to state legal reason for bans

No Education Ministry official has been able to give a legal reason for the hijab and beard ban.

First Deputy Education Minister Rakhmatullo Mirboboyev's assistant, who refused to give his name, as soon as he heard Forum 18's name on 3 October claimed that Mirboboyev is busy and put the phone down. He asked Forum 18 to call back in an hour, but every time Forum 18 called back he put the phone down as soon as he heard Forum 18's name.

Mirboboyev's advisor Khol Kholnazarov claimed that "I cannot discuss this with you" when asked on 3 October about the hijab and beard ban.

An official who refused to give their name when answering the telephone of Rajabali Sangov, Head of the Legal Support Section, claimed that "I am only responsible for cultural not legal issues". They refused to explain why beards and hijabs are banned.

Tajikistan demands extradition of bearded former football player

In 2011, the Tajikistan Football Federation disqualified professional football player Parviz Tursunov from professional football leagues for refusing to shave off his beard. Together with his family he left Tajikistan for the United Arab Emirates, where he lived until recently. "He was planning with his family to cross to Poland from Belarus to ask for asylum in Europe," relatives who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 3 October.

However, Belarus border guards arrested Tursunov at Tajikistan's request, accusing him of "extremism and being a member of the banned in Tajikistan Salafi Muslim movement" Tursunov's wife Sayyora Subhanova told RFE on 23 September. Salafi thought is banned in Tajikistan (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

Relatives of Tursunov told Forum 18 that "we do not know whether he is still in Belarus or was already extradited."

Why?

"We think that the authorities were angry that he stood for his religious beliefs and left his professional career," Tursunov's relatives told Forum 18. "He left the country protesting at the ban on beards. He wanted to freely practice his religious beliefs, one of which is that every Muslim man should have a beard. We think that the authorities are worried that, as he is well-known as a former professional footballer, other Tajik men may be inspired to follow his example."

"We do not exactly know what the authorities will do with him if he is extradited, and do not know what exact charges are brought against him," relatives said.

RFE reported that Tajikistan in February 2018 opened a case against Tursunov under Criminal Code 307-1 ("Public calls for extremist activity"). The maximum punishment for this is five years' jail.

Tursunov "never spoke publicly against the Tajik authorities", relatives insisted to Forum 18. They said that he is a peaceful man, and while in Dubai he and his wife lived peacefully earning a living as bakers. (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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