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TAJIKISTAN: Male police continue targeting women wearing hijabs

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

The long-running regime campaign to prevent women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf) intensified from March, human rights defenders including Muslim women say. Officials stop women in the street, question them, and order them to take off their hijab. "When they saw a woman in a hijab the male and female officials immediately encircled the woman," a human rights defender saw in early July, speaking "very rudely and harassing them if they refused to take off their hijab". The police, the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and the Interior Ministry all refused to explain to Forum 18 why male police officers nationwide are not stopped from deliberately and publicly bullying and harassing women wearing a hijab.

The regime's targeting of women who choose to wear the hijab (Islamic headscarf) has intensified since March, human rights defenders including Muslim women have told Forum 18. Male police officers, sometimes with female collaborators, have apparently increased their questioning of women wearing hijabs in streets, markets, and other public places. The women officials stop are then ordered to stop wearing hijabs.

The regime also stations female collaborators – supposedly from the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs - at the entrance to schools, hospitals and other public buildings for the specific purpose of stopping women in hijabs from receiving healthcare and other public services (see below).

A Muslim woman told Forum 18 that in June she saw a new poster at the entrance of a hospital depicting a Tajik woman in a traditional dress and cap. A caption described this as "the recommended dress code for women" (see below).

One human rights defender witnessed male police officers, with female officials from an unknown state agency, stopping individual hijab-wearing women in the street in early July. "When they saw a woman in a hijab the male and female officials immediately encircled the woman." The human rights defender witnessed the male and female officials "speaking to women very rudely and harassing them if they refused to take off their hijab" (see below).

The police, the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and the Interior Ministry all refused to explain to Forum 18 why male police officers nationwide are not stopped from deliberately and publicly bullying and harassing women wearing hijabs (see below).

A Muslim woman who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 how she was refused entrance to a hospital by women claiming to be from the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs. "They insisted that any woman with a hijab had to remove their hijab to get into hospital, as they claimed it is against Tajik morals and tradition. While I was at the hospital entrance at least 10 other women were stopped from getting treatment they needed" (see below).

"Every day, in addition to normal receptionists and security staff, officials or individuals collaborating with police stand at the entrance to schools, polyclinics, and other public buildings in Dushanbe and other cities," one human rights defender observed. "Their aim is to stop women wearing hijabs from entering" (see below).

Hospital staff and the Health and Social Protection Ministry did not want to discuss why women and their relatives are being denied treatment (see below).

Throughout 2020 and in 2021 men wearing beards do not seem to have been so systemically targeted, human rights defenders and Muslims told Forum 18. However, a Muslim man working in a bazaar told Forum 18 that "I shaved off my beard in 2020 as I was not allowed to come to my work. I did not want to lose my job as my whole family depends on me. I know many Muslim men in the bazaar who also shaved off their beards to be able to work," he added. "Some left their jobs in the bazaar because of this." Another human rights defender commented that: "Before 2018 most Tajik men wore long or short beards. There are not many men with beards today" (see below).

Targeting intensifies since March

Human rights defenders, including Muslim women, have told Forum 18 that the regime's targeting of women wearing the hijab has intensified since March. Officials are apparently increasing their questioning of women wearing hijabs in streets, markets, and other public places. Officials then order the women to stop wearing hijabs.

The regime also stations female collaborators – supposedly from the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs - at the entrance to schools, hospitals and other public buildings for the specific purpose of stopping women in hijabs from receiving healthcare and other public services.

The officials involved are from the Interior Ministry, the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, local municipal administrations, and in at least some cases the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police officers.

Punishments can be in the form of warnings, fines, or being fired from jobs for refusing to take off the hijab. "Women who insist on wearing the hijab cannot be employed in state jobs or in private sector work where they have to interact with the public," a human rights defender told Forum 18 on 27 July.

The regime's beard and hijab-wearing bans have been enforced since falsified 2015 elections resulted in Emomali Rahmon keeping the post of President (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625).

Among other incidents, in 2018 the regime forced one couple to divorce. "A normal and happy family was forced to break up," human rights defender Faizinisso Vokhidova told Forum 18 in October 2018 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2421) (Vokhidova died in January 2019). "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."

"The recommended dress code for women"

Two human rights defenders from Dushanbe and Khujand told Forum 18 that from June 2021 they started seeing public posters and billboards in their cities depicting the regime's view of how a Tajik woman should dress. "There are about 30 different dresses and ways of covering the head shown, but nothing resembling a hijab."

A Muslim woman told Forum 18 on 26 July that in June she saw a new poster at the entrance of a hospital depicting a Tajik woman in a traditional dress and cap. A caption described this as "the recommended dress code for women."

One human rights defender told Forum 18 on 29 July that they have seen similar posters within government agencies, educational, and healthcare institutions since at least 2019.

Daler Jabborov, Assistant to State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda, listened but did not reply as Forum 18 asked on 27 July why the regime targeted woman wearing the hijab and men wearing beards. Davlatzoda, who was present, refused to speak to Forum 18 and claimed through Jabborov that all questions must be put in writing.

Male and female officials bullying and harassing women in public

One human rights defender witnessed male police officers, with female officials from an unknown state agency, stopping individual hijab-wearing women in the street in Dushanbe's Shohmansur District in early July. "When they saw a woman in a hijab the male and female officials immediately encircled the woman." The officials would then order the woman to take off her hijab.

The human rights defender witnessed the male and female officials "speaking to women very rudely and harassing them if they refused to take off their hijab."

Some of the women who refused to take their hijabs off were then forcibly taken to Shohmansur Police Station No. 2. The human rights defender did not know what then happened to the women. They commented that in other cases they knew of "police write down women's names, take photographs of them, and give them warnings and fines".

The male Deputy Head of Shohmansur Police, Firuz Kodyrzoda, refused to explain to Forum 18 on 27 July why male police officers were not stopped from deliberately and publicly bullying and harassing women wearing hijabs, and why they forcibly took some women to Police Station No. 2. When Forum 18 asked him this, he put the phone down and did not answer subsequent calls.

Khilolby Kurbonzoda, Chair of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, on 27 July refused to explain to Forum 18 why the Committee does not intervene when male police officers deliberately and publicly bully and harass women wearing hijabs. "I do

not know, maybe those women with the police were not from our Committee," she claimed. She made no commitments to address the issue of male police officers targeting women.

The Interior Ministry's Department for the Struggle against Organised Crime deals with restricting the freedom of religion and belief, including police actions against women wearing the hijab. Officials who refused to give their names refused on 27 July to explain why male police officers nationwide are not stopped from deliberately and publicly bullying and harassing women wearing hijabs.

The duty officer at the NSC secret police headquarters in Dushanbe consistently refused to talk to Forum 18 on 28 July, putting the phone down each time.

"Every two or three weeks there are similar incidents in Dushanbe and other cities," one human rights defender observed. One June incident which was shared on social media showed a male police officer in Dushanbe stopping a Muslim woman wearing the hijab, claiming that "it is illegal to wear a hijab." The woman asked the officer "why the regime allows night clubs and mini skirts, but does not allow the hijab". The officer did not answer the question, but stated that his superior officer "is watching from a nearby car". The woman replied: "Tell your superior to try telling his wife how she should dress," and then walked away.

Police have set up roadblocks to enforce the bans, which have also been enforced in schools and universities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2421). Officials have refused to give Forum 18 a legal reason for the bans.

Around 20 Muslim women were in December 2019 detained in a Dushanbe street for wearing a hijab, with some being fined (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2553). Officers tortured one, Nilufar Rajabova, at a police station.

Impunity for multiple instances of torture of Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants continues (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2582). Officials have refused to tell Forum 18 why suspect torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture, as international human rights law requires.

Women blocked from entering hospitals

A Muslim woman who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 how she was refused entrance to a hospital. "This month I needed to help a relative get hospital treatment," she told Forum 18 on 26 July 2021. "But I wasn't allowed to enter as I was wearing a hijab, even though the relative couldn't get in for treatment without me and the doctor we needed to see was at the entrance."

The woman was denied entrance by women claiming to be from the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs. "They insisted that any woman with a hijab had to remove their hijab to get into hospital, as they claimed it is against Tajik morals and tradition. While I was at the hospital entrance at least 10 other women were stopped from getting treatment they needed."

The family eventually found a doctor who for a fee would treat their relative outside the state system. The regime claims its healthcare system provides care for everyone, yet the system is in a poor state and corruption is widespread (<https://www.fpc.org.uk/stuck-between-underinvestment-government-authoritarianism-and-corruption-the-healthcare-system-in-tajikistan-and-the-risks-for-the-population/>).

Female wearers of the hijab have told Forum 18 of similar incidents at other hospitals. "Women who stand at the entrance of hospitals to stop hijab wearers say they are from the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs," one woman told Forum 18. "Yet I do not think that all of them are from the Committee, as it does not have such a large female staff. They must be being hired, maybe by police, for the anti-hijab campaign."

Women claiming to be Committee staff appear at some hospitals two or three times a month, but normal security staff every day stop women wearing hijabs from entering, another human rights defender told Forum 18 on 29 July.

State Committee for Women and Family Affairs Chair Kurbonzoda claimed to Forum 18: "We are only talking to women and not giving them orders. We have our own national traditions and dress for women." She then claimed that "the hijab is not banned, women can easily continue wearing the hijab".

"Every day, in addition to normal receptionists and security staff, officials or individuals collaborating with police stand at the entrance to schools, polyclinics, and other public buildings in Dushanbe and other cities," one human rights defender observed. "Their aim is to stop women wearing hijabs from entering."

Hospital staff did not want to discuss the denial of treatment to women and their relatives, stating that questions about the anti-hijab campaign should be put to the Health and Social Protection Ministry. "It is not a matter that we make decisions about," one staff member told Forum 18.

Health and Social Protection Ministry spokesperson Muhammadmusa Idris denied that any woman have been denied healthcare for wearing the hijab. "These are your assumptions but not facts," he claimed to Forum 18 on 28 July. When Forum 18 pointed out that women wearers of the hijab and human rights defenders have confirmed that preventing female wearers from entering hospitals is widespread, spokesperson Idris claimed: "I cannot speak for the Ministry, but as an ordinary citizen I can say that we do not know of such violations." He then refused to discuss the issue more.

Hijab-wearing women have long been refused employment and medical care (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2421). Narzullo Mirzoaliyev, Head of the Personnel Department of the Health and Social Protection Ministry, refused to explain to Forum 18 in October 2018 why the Ministry's dress code does not allow the employment of women wearing the hijab.

When Forum 18 asked why a woman it had spoken to was denied health care in a hospital when she refused to take off her hijab, Mirzoaliyev of the Health and Social Protection Ministry claimed that the Ministry "is not responsible for hospitals". (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2421) He then refused to talk more to Forum 18.

School blocked women in hijab to enter the school for a parents' meeting

In 2018 police started to visit schools in Dushanbe to enforce the hijab ban on pupils (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2421) between the ages of 6 and 18. This ban continues.

A Muslim woman, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that in May 2021 family members were stopped from attending a parents' meeting at a Dushanbe school children of the family attend. "Two men standing at the school gate did not allow female family members wearing a hijab to enter the school," the woman stated. The men stated that the ban was being especially strictly enforced that day as state TV would be present. "The Headteacher told us that absolutely no-one wearing a hijab should be allowed in," the men stated.

Education and Science Ministry spokesperson Ekhsan Safarzoda on 28 July refused to say why women wearing hijabs were not allowed in schools. Safarzoda then put Forum 18 through to Kutbiddin Mukhiddinzoda, Head of the Ministry's Department overseeing pre-school and school education. However, Mukhiddinzoda's secretary (who refused to give her name) claimed that he is not available to talk and then put the phone down.

Shave off your beard or lose your job..

Throughout 2020 and in 2021 men wearing beards do not seem to have been as systemically targeted as women, human rights defenders and Muslims told Forum 18. "This may be because men with beards are banned from working in state jobs or in private businesses in public places (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625), such as shops or open air markets," one human rights defender suggested to Forum 18 on 26 July.

However, a Muslim man working in a bazaar in Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 27 July that "I shaved off my beard in 2020 as I was not allowed to come to my work. I did not want to lose my job as my whole family depends on me. I know many Muslim men in the bazaar who also shaved their beards off to be able to work," he added. "Some left their jobs in the bazaar because of this."

"Fewer men are seen in Dushanbe or other major cities wearing beards," another human rights defender noted on 27 July. "Before 2018 most Tajik men wore long or short beards. There are not many men with beards today."

In 2015 police started forcibly shaving many bearded Muslim men throughout the country (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2060). Independent legal expert Faredun Hodizoda noted that "aren't such actions and bans something that those interested in promoting jihad will use to provoke a reaction?" In May 2015, Deputy Interior Minister Ikrom Umarzoda refused to state who ordered the beard-shaving campaign, which started soon after the regime of Emomali Rahmon banned women wearing the hijab. Officials contradicted themselves on whether police would be held responsible. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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