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TAJIKISTAN: Mosque visits and hijabs banned for children

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Tajikistan has banned female schoolchildren from wearing the hijab headscarf and, in a secret unwritten instruction, barred children from visiting mosques in school hours, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Some imams in the capital Dushanbe are, to Forum 18's knowledge, interpreting this as meaning that no children should be allowed into mosques at any time. Education Minister Abdudjabor Rahmonov has claimed that wearing the hijab "is unacceptable in secular schools and violates the constitution and a new law on education," even though the Tajik constitution does not bar wearing the hijab. Rahmonov also claimed that many pupils "spend evenings in mosques and do not do their homework." No-one at the Education Ministry or the state Religious Affairs Committee was prepared to discuss the bans, but one official told Forum 18 that the headscarf ban had not been decided by the Religious Affairs Committee, saying that "this decision was evidently taken right at the top."

Soon after the head of the Religious Affairs Office told Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, on 28 October, that children were not allowed to visit mosques in school hours, imams received secret unwritten orders from the authorities not to allow children into mosques during school hours, a source in the Tajik capital Dushanbe, who prefers to remain anonymous, has told Forum 18 News Service. Some imams in Dushanbe are, to Forum 18's knowledge, interpreting this as meaning that no children should be allowed into mosques at any time. The ban, issued in the final part of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, came soon after the Education Ministry banned female students from wearing Islamic headscarves (hijabs) in secular state schools. Both the ban on mosque visits and the wearing of hijabs apply across the country.

Wearing the hijab, or head scarf traditionally worn by Muslim women, and other religious symbols "is unacceptable in secular schools and violates the constitution and a new law on education," the local media quoted Education Minister Abdudjabor Rahmonov as declaring on 21 October. The Tajik constitution does not contain any provisions barring the hijab.

Rahmonov also claimed that he was concerned that pupils spend too much time in mosques, to the detriment of their education. "Many spend evenings in mosques and do not do their homework," Rahmonov said, adding that during Ramadan many do not attend classes after Friday prayers.

No-one at the Education Ministry in Dushanbe was prepared to tell Forum 18 the status of the headscarf ban or why it was imposed. Reached on 28 October, an aide to the Minister, who did not identify himself, declined to answer any questions about the bans and referred all enquiries to the press office and the ministry's International Department. However, the telephones went unanswered.

Tajikistan has previously banned the wearing of the hijab for internal identity document photographs (See F18News 9 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=337).

Shamsuddin Nuriddinov, head of the Religious Affairs Office of Dushanbe city administration, insisted that traditional Tajik headscarves that cover girls' hair are still acceptable. "Only banned is wearing the hijab, the scarf that covers not only the hair but the neck also," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 28 October. "This 'fashion' has come to us from Iran, and such attire is not allowed in secular educational establishments."

Reached by Forum 18 on 28 October, Muradulo Davlatov, the chairman of the government's national Religious Affairs Committee, categorically refused to explain why children have been banned from attending mosques or why schoolgirls have been banned from wearing the hijab, saying he was too busy. Another official at the Committee, who preferred not to give his name, told Forum 18 that the decision to ban the wearing of headscarves in schools had not been taken at the Religious Affairs Committee. "This decision was evidently taken right at the top," the official told Forum 18. "Journalists recently asked Muradulo Davlatov why the Education Ministry had taken this decision, but he refused to answer." He added that he knew nothing about an order not to allow underage children into mosques.

"We believe that decision not to allow students to wear headscarves is a flagrant infringement of Muslims' rights," Muhiddin Kabiri, deputy head of the Islamic Revival Party in Tajikistan, the major Islamic political party, told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 29 October. "Unfortunately, the ulema council (the former Muftiate), which is completely dependent on the authorities, has not responded at all to this disgraceful, arbitrary order." Kabiri also confirmed that imams have received a secret order from the

authorities not to allow schoolchildren into mosques.

Hamdulo Rahimov, imam-hatyb of Dushanbe's central mosque, said he has heard about the Education Ministry instruction. "But it is just a verbal instruction, and there is no official order not to allow the wearing of headscarves in education establishments," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 30 October. "So far, the ulema council has not issued an opinion about the Education Ministry's order, and so I would rather not make any comment."

Rahimov also partially confirmed that the authorities had issued an order banning schoolchildren from visiting mosques. "We aren't turning schoolchildren out of mosques," he insisted to Forum 18. "But it is true that we have been advised to persuade mosque-goers that their children should not attend mosque too much, as it could have a bad effect on their studies." He said they also advise parents that their children should not attend mosque during school lessons.

For more background see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>

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