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Hijab ban sparks protests

by Shirin Azizmamadova and Zarema Velikhanova

IWPR (22.11.2005) / HRWF Int. (23.11.2005) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - From Baku to Dushanbe, anger and frustration is growing over government curbs on the Muslim headscarf. The Tajik education ministry announced October 19 it had banned the hijab at all secular schools.

In Azerbaijan, thousands of women have been deprived of political and civil rights as the result of a divisive law banning women from wearing the head scarf in photographs on all identity documents.

When straight A student Dilnoza Mukhsinzoda was ordered to remove her hijab while at school or face expulsion, she had no problem deciding what to do.

Mukhsinzoda, the first in her school to wear the Muslim headscarf, became the first to be excluded from lessons for refusing to obey a controversial new rule on removing it while in the classroom. "According to the Koran a woman must wear the hijab. I consider this my duty. Let them expel me. I will know that I am suffering for my religious convictions," said Mukhsinzoda, a 16-year-old from the northern city of Khojent who is in her last year of study.

The Tajik education ministry announced October 19 it had banned the hijab at all secular schools. Deputy Education Minister Farkhod Rakhimov said girls who disobeyed would be expelled. Headscarves worn in the traditional Tajik manner – pulled behind the head, leaving the neck and forehead exposed – are still permitted.

"We have religious schools, and girls who like wearing the hijab should study there," said Education Minister Abdujabbor Rakhmonov.

In a country where 98 per cent of the population is Muslim, reaction to the edict has been mixed. The director of Mukhsinzoda's school, Mukhabbat Bobokjanova, believes the ministry's decision is correct. "We have a democratic, secular state," said Bobokjanova. "There is a school uniform and nothing is said there about Muslim headscarves. As the girls study at a state school, they should wear the ordinary school uniform."

However, Madina, in her fifth year in the oriental studies department of the Tajik national university, points to recent events in Western Europe as proof that forbidding the hijab in Tajik schools is a bad idea. "What did the authorities achieve by banning the hijab in France – this was in a European country, and now it is in flames," she said, referring to the recent riots. "And we live in a Muslim country. It would be better for them to sort out the education system, the bribes that the teachers take from us, instead of picking on the students. They won't achieve anything. We wore the hijab, and we will continue to wear it."

The new regulation has also provoked a wave of anger from the country's Muslim clergy. Head of the Ulem council, Egamberdy Khudoberdyev said he was "indignant" about the banning of hijabs in school. "When a girl comes of age, by shariat law she is obliged to cover her face. This is her duty," he said. "In the 1,400 years that Islam has existed, no one has yet suffered from wearing the headscarf."

"The education ministry has its own laws, and Islam has its laws. I still thought that they did not contradict each other. Wearing short skirts and t-shirts is permitted, but the hijab is not. It is my firm belief that all the modern troubles of mankind come from women with uncovered heads."

The opposition Party of the Islamic Revival of Tajikistan, meanwhile, said the ban contradicts both the country's constitution and the interests of the vast majority of its citizens.

The issue of the hijab and its place in secular societies is controversial throughout the region. In Azerbaijan, thousands of women have been deprived of political and civil rights as the result of a divisive law banning women from wearing the head scarf in photographs on all identity documents, including driver's licenses and internal passports.

The decree from Azerbaijan's interior ministry saying women must be pictured without the hijab dates back to the late 1990s, but the situation became acute only recently when the old Soviet identity card expired in July 2005.

Those who refuse to remove the hijab for their photograph will not be issued with a replacement, meaning they cannot apply for a passport to travel abroad, register at a hospital, vote or attend university.

There had been fears that up to 4,000 hijab-wearing women without the new identity card would be denied the opportunity to participate in the recent parliamentary poll. At the last minute, however, the country's Central Election Commission ruled the old documents would be valid ID during the election, as many Azeris hadn't yet been able to obtain new ones.

But this concession was only a temporary reprieve, and the government remains resolute on the hijab ban for all new identity documents. Officials insist the rule is essential to protect the secular nature of Azerbaijan and ensure there's a separation between mosque and state. "We are talking about attributes of a secular state which are accepted all over the world," said the head of the state committee on religious organisations, Rafik Aliev, explaining the interior ministry's position.

Aldar Zeinalov, head of the Azerbaijan Human Rights Centre, had a different explanation, saying the government is going too far in a misguided attempt to prove itself to the West. "Officials probably believe that banning the hijab on document photos will be seen by the international community as a war on Islamic radicalism, as part of the war on terrorism," he said.

As in Tajikistan, Azeri students and teachers who wear the hijab have also complained of discrimination. Though there are no laws prohibiting headscarves in the classroom, at the start of each academic year nonetheless there are reports of headscarf-wearing pupils being intimidated. This year, eight pupils and one teacher at a school in Zabrat, Baku told IWPR they were threatened by the school director with expulsion if they came to lessons again in the hijab.

However, the government denies that charge of discrimination. "No one forbids girls from attending lessons in headscarves. It would be wrong to force them to remove their headscarves and leave the lessons," said Education Minister Misir Mardanov in an interview in the Azeri press.

Shakhla Alieva, a biology teacher in the town of Sumgait near Baku, experienced a different kind of prejudice. In March, she was told by officials at the school where she worked that "a religious person cannot teach biology". Though she insists she taught the subject according to the approved curriculum, she was removed from the classroom.

"I do not have any problem in teaching Darwin's theory or any other theory, and I believe that in science there is a place for the pluralism of different theoretical views," she said.

Appeals to the school by the Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion, DEVAMM, had no effect, nor did a plea to the state ombudsman. When she took the case to court she was fired, though in the end she won out, with the Sumgait Court of Appeal awarding her compensation and ordering the school to give her job back.

Like the Tajiks, Azeris have a range of views on the issue of hijabs in school with some like Ajdar Agaev, chairman of the Azerbaijan Education Council, "opposed to wearing the hijab, crosses around the neck, even in the form of jewellery and other religious symbols at school".

"Among other things, I am also worried by another aspect of the problem – forcing people to observe

certain traditions," he added. "I asked one female student why she wore the hijab. And she admitted that her religious brother forced her to, threatening her that if he saw her without the hijab, he would kill her."

Aidyn Mirzazade, a member of the parliamentary commission for international relations and inter-parliamentary ties, urged tolerance. "If pupils want to come to school wearing a headscarf, then that is their personal business," said Mirzazade. "The most important thing is that children do not break the general rules of the school where they study."

Back in Tajikistan, Ibodat, a university student, is planning to give up her studies rather than abandon the hijab. "I will not obey the administration of the university and follow their rules," she said.

Mokhira, also a student, has adopted a wait-and-see attitude, hoping the furore will eventually die out. "I have taken off the hijab for the moment," she said. "I'll put it back on when everything calms down."

Despite flouting the rules, Dilnoza Mukhsinzoda hasn't been expelled from school. With the support of her mother she has instead chosen to leave and continue her education at a madrasa, a religious school, which her family believes will better prepare Mukhsinzoda for her future.

"The education received at a madrasa allows students to receive an education and be a Muslim," explained Mukhsinzoda's mother. "I will marry off my daughters before they turn 18. My husband and I will choose husbands for them. My daughters are not the kind who fall in love. They hardly talk to boys, and if they do it is only on friendly terms."

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Banned Church once again operating freely

by Igor Rotar

Forum 18 News Service (15.09.2005) / HRWF Int. (15.09.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net - The pastor of a Korean-led Pentecostal church in the northern town of Khujand closed down by the government's religious affairs committee in April has told Forum 18 News Service that her church has been able to resume its activities and operate unimpeded.

"I don't know whether or not our work has been closed down officially," Larisa Kagai of the Sonmin Sunbogim (Grace) church told Forum 18 on 14 September, "but now, thank God, the authorities are not interfering in our activities."

She said the religious affairs committee issued the closure order after one former church member "who had been exposed as a thief" wrote a denunciation of the church to the committee. "He grossly distorted the facts," Kagai reported. "That was when our problems started." But she said that after travelling to the capital Dushanbe she managed to persuade officials at the religious affairs committee to change their minds.

Sanobar Nurova, chief specialist on non-Islamic faiths at the government's religious affairs committee, admitted that her committee halted the work of the Sonmin Sunbogim church in Khujand in April. "The church had flagrantly flouted Tajikistan's laws - members of the congregation were actively preaching outside the confines of the church," she claimed to Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 September. "They had also opened a department offering Tae Kwon-Do courses for children and teenagers, but reached their beliefs at these classes without the permission of the pupils' parents."

Back in May, in the wake of the closure order, Madhakim Pustiev of the religious affairs committee had told Forum 18 that the activity of the church had annoyed Muslims and some of them had asked for the church to be closed, but had refused to say which laws the church had broken. Nurova maintained that Tajiks are tolerant and well-disposed towards Christians, including relatives who had converted to Christianity. "The only thing that arouses the wrath of Muslims is when representatives of other religions start actively preaching their beliefs in their midst," she told Forum 18. Nurova maintains that the most active believers in this respect are the Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Sonmin Sunbogim.

However, she categorically denied a 2 September report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) that two other religious communities - the Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses - had been temporarily banned on 25 July. "We are aware of the article in IWPR, and we can say with conviction that the journalist has at the very least partially distorted the facts. We have not put a stop to the activities either of the Jehovah's Witnesses or of the Baptists."

The deputy head of Tajikistan's Baptist Union, Oleg Pilkevich, confirmed that the religious affairs committee has not banned his Church's activities. "So far at least, thank God, we have no problems with the authorities," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 September.

Anatoli Melnik, deputy head of the Council of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan who is also responsible for monitoring the rights of his fellow-believers in all the Central Asian republics, also denied that Jehovah's Witness communities in Tajikistan had been banned. "We did hear about the publication of an article saying that the Tajik authorities had halted the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. I can tell you with authority that this report does not reflect the facts," he told Forum 18 from the Kazakh town of Shymkent.

Source: www.forum18.org

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Why was Protestant Church ordered closed?

by Igor Rotar

Forum 18 News Service (12.05.2003) / HRWF Int. (13.05.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net - Officials of the government's religious affairs committee have claimed that the Sonmin Grace church in the northern town of Khujand has been ordered closed for violating the law, but have refused to explain their decision to Forum 18 News Service.

Yet committee official Madhakim Pustiev admitted: "The activity of the church had annoyed Muslims and some of them asked for the Khujand branch of the church to be closed." Preacher Alisher Haidarov said the church is still open at the moment. "The most absurd thing is that we cannot even understand what specific legal violations we are accused of. Our church has existed in Khujand for 11 years and we have never broken any laws," he told Forum 18. The religion committee chairman has called for local authorities to supervise closely the activities of religious organisations.

Although the head of the government's religious affairs committee has refused to tell Forum 18 News Service why a Korean-led Protestant church in the northern town of Khujand has been ordered to close down by the authorities, one of his assistants admitted that pressure from local Muslims had been involved. "The activity of the church had annoyed Muslims and some of them asked for the Khujand branch of the church to be closed," Madhakim Pustiev, the committee official responsible for non-Muslim religious communities, told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 10 May. However, he declined to say which laws the Khujand branch of the Sonmin Sunbogim (Grace) church had broken. "I refuse to answer this question by phone. If you want to talk about this, come and see us in Dushanbe."

Reached earlier that day, committee chairman Murodullo Davlatov confirmed that the activity of the Sonmin Grace church had been temporarily halted, but he too refused to explain why, claiming he was too busy. "Ask Pustiev – he is responsible in our committee for the activity of non-Muslim religious associations and he will clarify the situation for you."

Davlatov had told a Dushanbe press conference on 26 April that the activity of the Sonmin Grace church in Khujand had been halted on 14 April because it had violated the law. "Most of its services are being held outside the church," he complained. "Opening sports clubs in the town of Khujand, the Sonmin Grace Church was educating young people in the spirit of religious fanaticism and unquestioning blind obedience to pastors." He said this violated Article 15 of the religion law. "There have also been other

cases of violation of the country's law on religion and religious organisations. The activities of this church have been suspended until the situation is resolved."

He also admitted that in this and in other cases hostility from local people has played a part. "The Jehovah's Witnesses organisation had been involved in some extremist activities, to which we have put an end. Organisations like the Evangelical Christian Baptists and the Sonmin Grace Church used to illegally attract people to their churches, and this provoked a negative reaction from local people."

Frank Johansen, the head of the OSCE office in northern Tajikistan, reported that at a press conference at the beginning of May the Khujand city administration announced the closure of several religious associations. "Basically these were religious associations not registered with the Ministry of Justice," he told Forum 18 from Khujand on 10 May (though under Tajik law registration is not compulsory). "However, I have not heard anything about the closure of the Khujand branch of the Sonmin Grace church."

Church members are working to try to keep the church open. "For the time being our church is not closed," Alisher Haidarov, a preacher of the Sonmin Grace church, told Forum 18 from Khujand on 11 May. "We are trying to find a compromise with the local authorities and to convince them that we are not doing anything illegal. The most absurd thing is that we cannot even understand what specific legal violations we are accused of. Our church has existed in Khujand for 11 years and we have never broken any laws."

The Sonmin Grace church, one of the largest Protestant churches in Tajikistan, is an active missionary church, and this often upsets some Muslims. In October 2000 two Islamic radicals launched a terrorist attack on the Sonmin Grace church building in Dushanbe, which killed nine people, injured about fifty and devastated the building. Three months later a daughter church was the target of a bomb, but this time no-one was hurt in the explosion.

Baptist pastor Sergei Besarab, who had been actively engaged in missionary activity, was murdered in January 2004 in the town of Isfara, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Khujand. The trial is now underway in Khujand of members of a radical Islamic group Bayat (an Arabic word meaning oath) who are accused of his murder.

At the Dushanbe press conference, Davlatov reported that his committee has registered one Islamic university, 18 madrasahs (Islamic schools), 228 central mosques and 2,880 five-time prayer mosques, as well as about 85 non-Muslim religious communities. He complained that "unfortunately" 26 unregistered mosques were operating in various parts of the country. "For example, two central mosques are functioning in Shohmansur district's Buston neighbourhood, which has a population of only 9,080. The law stipulates that a central mosque can be built in a neighbourhood or settlement with a population of over 15,000."

He also complained about what he called the "vast quantity" of Muslim and non-Muslim religious books entering Tajikistan, bemoaning the fact that there is no control over this. "One does not need to get special permission from our committee to bring them into our country, although this should be required," he told the press conference. "Experts on religion usually check this kind of literature. Six non-Islamic organisations have been granted permission to bring 2,000 copies of books into our country this year." He also claimed that it is "likely" that many Christian books are being "illegally" printed in Tajikistan. He called for local authorities to supervise closely the activities of religious organisations.

<http://www.forum18.org>

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Radical Islamic group member convicted of murdering Christian missionary

AP (07.02.2005) / HRWF Int. (08.02.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net - A Tajikistan court have sentenced a member of a radical Islamic group to 24 years in jail in the murder of a Christian missionary last year, the Interior Ministry said Monday.

Sadullo Madiyurov, 33, a member of the Bayat group, told the court in the northern town of Isfara that he had taken part in killing Serghei Besarab on religious hatred grounds, the Interior Ministry's press office said.

Besarab, a missionary from the Union of Evangelist Churches, was fatally shot in his home in Isfara in January 2004.

Madiyurov's exact role in the killing was not specified. Several more suspects are expected to be tried in connection with the murder, the ministry said.

Bayat, a local radical group, has been active in northern Tajikistan in the past several years and has been accused of crimes including desecration of churches and mosques.

Tajikistan is a predominantly Muslim country. Less than 10 percent of the population of the Central Asian nation identify themselves as Christians.

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