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"Teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat"

Forum 18 (29.07.2015) - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2085 - In mid-July police raided Jehovah's Witnesses as they met for prayer and Bible study in a flat in Sugd Region in the far north of Tajikistan. Police have prepared charges against eight of those present, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 28 July, but more charges might follow. In another incident in Sugd Region in late July, police hit two female Jehovah's Witnesses, and are preparing administrative punishments against them. Because Jehovah's Witnesses do not have state registration in Tajikistan, "our believers face trouble from the authorities very often", Jehovah's Witnesses stated.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in Tajikistan since 2007.

Police defended the raid on the meeting to exercise freedom of religion or belief, stating that Jehovah's Witnesses were "teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat". An officer denied to Forum 18 that the two women were hit on the head while in detention.

The raid, detentions and physical abuse came as a senior Interior Ministry official warned Muslims at a central mosque in the capital Dushanbe during Friday prayers that they will face punishment if they leave prayers before they are completed. He appeared to suggest that all Muslims must follow the practices of the Hanafi school of Islam. He made it clear that all mosques in Tajikistan are under state surveillance (see below).

Forms of Islam the government does not like have, like Jehovah's Witnesses, also been banned. These include Salafis and the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, and their adherents face possible criminal prosecution and imprisonment.

Jehovah's Witness ban continues

Jehovah's Witnesses have repeatedly tried to have the nationwide ban on their activity overturned and regain state registration, with meetings in the Presidential Administration and the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA). However, the SCRA rejected their third attempt to lodge a registration application in September 2014.

The ban was imposed in October 2007. Officials claimed that it was because Jehovah's Witnesses distribute "propagandistic books on their religion", have conscientious objections to military service, refuse blood transfusions, and are "a destructive cult".

SCRA officials promised Jehovah's Witnesses verbally in meetings in Dushanbe over the past year that the community may receive state registration once again in the near future. However, in a July meeting SCRA officials told the community that it is "not

willing to do so because we do not want to deal with all these religious problems in the country", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

The officials who answered the phones between 25 and 28 July of SCRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda refused to say why Jehovah's Witnesses are being denied state registration. Nor would they explain why the authorities, who refuse to give them state registration, demand at the same time that they cannot meet in their homes for prayer and Bible reading without registration. They also refused to put Forum 18 through to Davlatzoda.

Charged for exercising freedom of religion or belief

On 18 July 15 officials - from the Criminal Police, local police, local Administration and SCRA - raided the home of Nazira Oripova, a Jehovah's Witness who lives in Bobojon-Gofurov District on the outskirts of the regional capital Khujand [Khojand]. The officials "climbed over the fence and broke into the home," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. "They disrupted the prayers and Bible reading of the 12 believers." Confiscating the "few Bibles", Police took all 12 to the District Police Station for questioning.

Bobojon-Gofurov District Police then decided to open administrative cases against eight of them: the home owner Oripova, as well as Bimavlyuda Yokubova, Yusufjon Yakubov, Umeda Mansurova, Abdujamol Bobojonov, Tillakiz Yakubova, Kimarbon Bobojonov and Farogat Muhiddinova. After being held at the Police Station for "several hours", the Jehovah's Witnesses were released the same day.

The cases against the eight are under Administrative Code Article 474, Part 1. This punishes "violation of the Religion Law", including by conducting any religious activity (including giving religious teaching) without state permission or in locations not approved by the state. Punishments for individuals are fines of between seven and 10 Financial Indicators (FIs). Religious leaders face fines of between 20 and 30 FIs. Legal entities face fines of between 100 and 200 MFIs.

One Financial Indicator remained unchanged in the 2015 budget at 40 Somonis (about 50 Norwegian Kroner, 6 Euros, or 6 US Dollars).

Although prosecutors have given the eight Jehovah's Witnesses copies of the indictments, it appears the cases have not yet been sent to court.

Police demand Jehovah's Witnesses renounce their faith

While at the Police Station on 18 July, the 12 were questioned by Khurshed Barotov, Deputy Chief of the District Criminal Police, as well as Manucher Ergashev, Criminal Police Officer, who also participated in the raid. The officers "told the believers that they must renounce their faith," told them that "if they could act on their free will, they would make jihad against them since they betrayed Islam", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Officer Barotov adamantly denied that he and his colleague Ergashev threatened any of the 12 Jehovah's Witnesses. "We are a democratic state, and the authorities themselves fight against jihadists, what are you saying?" he asked Forum 18. Asked why the authorities raided Oripova's home and why cases were opened against eight of those detained, Barotov replied: "They were teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat."

Asked why Jehovah's Witnesses cannot meet in their own homes for prayer and Bible reading, Barotov replied: "We have freedom of religion in Tajikistan but they must not violate the Law."

More charges to follow?

At the moment the Jehovah's Witnesses are being charged with "teaching religion in an unauthorized location", Barotov told Forum 18. But depending on the result of the religious "expert analysis" of the Bibles, he added, the charges may be changed. Additional charges may be brought for "use of illegal religious literature".

Seyidjon Omonov, Expert of Bobojon-Gofurov District Administration's Religious Affairs Division, who is responsible for the "expert analysis" of religious literature, said he had not seen the literature confiscated from the Jehovah's Witnesses. "But I will study it and give my opinion within two or three days," he told Forum 18 on 28 July. "If only Bibles were confiscated then we will not give a negative opinion," he added. "But if there are different Jehovah's Witness magazines we have to see what is written in them. As a rule in the past we did not evaluate Jehovah's Witnesses literature as extremist."

Police detained, hit and threatened two women

On 26 July police in Khujand in Sugd Region detained on the street two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Gulnora Tegniyeva and Chaborkhon Bozorboyeva. They took them at about 6 pm for questioning at the city's Sohili-Rost (residential area) Police Station. Cases were opened against the two women, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18, and they believe that the entire incident was instigated by the police.

At the Police Station, Officer Azamot Bobokhudjayev, Chief of the Station, pressured the two women to sign the police report, which they refused to do, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Then the Officer "hit both of them on the head and slapped them," threatening that he would "lock them up for 15 days". Though Tegniyeva and Bozorboyeva "felt pain and very bad" they refused to sign the police reports.

Officers then confiscated their passports, one Bible and one tablet device. They then released the two women at about 10 pm, four hours after they were first brought there, Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

"We acted on complaints from their neighbours that they illegally propagate their faith among their neighbours," Officer Bobokhudjayev claimed to Forum 18 on 28 July. He adamantly denied he hit the two women. "Who is telling you these lies?" he asked Forum 18, with what sounded like a nervous laugh.

Asked what charges are being brought against the two women, Bobokhudjayev said that an "administrative case may be opened". Asked why he confiscated the two women's passports, Bobokhudjayev was quick to respond: "We are ready to return their passports."

Police frame Jehovah's Witnesses?

The trouble for Tegniyeva and Bozorboyeva began several days before their 26 July detention. "One woman, who introduced herself as Farzono, phoned the two ladies several times and told them that she is interested in their faith, and that she wants to meet them on the street and talk to them," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18

They met on 26 July at 5.30 pm at a bus stop near Sohili-Rost Police Station. Farzono "immediately began talking to them, behaving as if she has known them for a long time. She began loudly speaking about women wearing the hijab [Muslim women's headscarf]."

Women have from March been stopped by the state from wearing a hijab in public, and Muslim men have had their beards forcibly shaved off. However, it appears that both campaigns have recently slowed down, local human rights defenders told Forum 18.

As soon as Farzono began speaking to Tegniyeva and Bozorboyeva about the hijab, two cars approached and four police officers got out. They showed their identification documents and asked Tegniyeva and Bozorboyeva to get in the car. When the two refused, the officers "forced and pushed them into the car". The two were then taken to the Police Station.

Asked who Farzono is and whether a case was also opened against her, Officer Bobokhudjayev did not answer. When Forum 18 asked whether Farzono works for the police and, if so, why police instigated a case against the two Jehovah's Witnesses, Bobokhudjayev refused to respond. "I will not talk to you further over the phone. Please send your representative to our office," he said.

Punishment threatened for not being Hanafi

Meanwhile, during Friday prayers on 3 July in the central Khodji Yokub Mosque in Dushanbe, Police Colonel Barotali Khamidzoda, who represents the Interior Ministry's Special Forces controlling "religious extremism" cases, warned attendees that "anyone leaving Tajikistan's mosques before Friday prayers are fully read will be punished." However he did not specify what the punishments would be.

Tajikistan continues to penalise people exercising their freedom of religion or belief for their ideas, not their actions. Salafi, Jamaat Tabligh and Shia Muslims, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, have all been targeted by the state.

Colonel Khamidzoda explained that those who leave early do "not respect Hanafi Muslim teachings (..) and divide Tajikistan along sectarian lines", Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service noted on 3 July. He insisted that "we cannot allow the influence of various Islamic groups and teachings".

Colonel Khamidzoda warned that the law-enforcement agencies "observe to ensure order and discipline during the namaz [Muslim prayer] in all the country's mosques and will spare no effort for the sake of peace and security of believers during prayers."

Leaving mosque early a crime?

Colonel Khamidzoda defended his warnings to mosque attendees. "Sometimes Salafis or people from other Muslim movements banned in Tajikistan may attend a mosque and leave in the middle of the prayers, and we would like to identify those," he told Forum 18 on 23 July.

Asked why all Muslims are being forced to accept the Hanafi school of Islam and how the police will determine who those who leave early are, Colonel Khamidzoda did not answer. "I will not tell you this over the phone." Asked what the punishments will be, he referred Forum 18 to the Interior Ministry's International Affairs Section. "I will give no further comments," he said.

Colonel Zumrat Soliyeva, Head of the Interior Ministry's International Affairs Section, told Forum 18 on 23 July: "I do not know why Colonel Khamidzoda made those comments, or why he referred you to us." She then referred Forum 18 to the Ministry's Press Secretary.

Asked why Colonel Khamidzoda or the Ministry are pressuring Muslims to adhere only to the Hanafi school of Islam or follow all its rules, Press Secretary Jaloliddin Sadriddinov

also told Forum 18: "I do not know why he those statements. Let him explain his own statements."

Huseyn Shokirov, a newly-appointed official who oversees mosques at the SCRA in Dushanbe, dismissed Colonel Khamidzoda's statements. "Religious issues are not in the competence of the Interior Ministry," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 23 July. "Anyone is free in democratic Tajikistan to leave the mosque at any time."

"Example of direct state interference"

Rustom Gulov, an independent human rights defender from Khujand, described Colonel Khamidzoda's statements and warnings as an "example of direct state interference in the private matters of faith of its citizens".

Tajikistan has in recent years increased its attempts to impose state control on Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Some Muslims do not remain in the mosques until all the prayers are read, Gulov explained to Forum 18 on 23 July. They think that they need stay only until the main part of the prayer is done and then do the rest at home privately. "Who can guarantee that the police will not begin catching innocent people who leave prayers early because they have to leave urgently for important reasons, or think they may do the rest at home?"

My police shave me

Forum 18 (06.05.2015) - In March and April Tajikistan's police started forcibly shaving numerous bearded Muslim men throughout the country, including on the streets of the capital Dushanbe and the northern city of Khujand, local people have told Forum 18 News Service. Police also told those they forcibly shaved that they must not wear beards.

Faredun Hodizoda, an independent legal expert in Dushanbe, told Forum 18 that he knows of many men in the capital and many other places across the country being stopped by police and then having their beards forcibly shaved off. "Just the other day a taxi driver complained to me of this happening to his nephew, for example", he told Forum 18 on 29 April.

The campaign against men wearing beards comes soon after President Emomali Rahmon in early March banned women from wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). Women were even stopped at kindergartens to be told that they must not drop their children off while wearing a hijab. Officials categorically denied these incidents, as well as orders to imams to read state-produced sermons at Friday prayers before unfree parliamentary elections and moves to ban the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (see F18News 1 April 2015http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2053).

A provocation to Muslims

"What the police officers did to Gulov [see below] and others is wrong", legal expert Hodizoda stated. "It is a violation of their freedom of religion or belief and other personal liberties." He compared the beard-shaving to Soviet times, "when we could not wear beards or long hair to work or universities."

The authorities may explain their actions by claiming that they are afraid of radical religious movements or possible jihad, he noted. "But aren't such actions and bans something that those interested in promoting jihad will use to provoke a reaction from the Muslims of Tajikistan?" he asked.

Who ordered anti-beard campaign?

Deputy Interior Minister Ikrom Umarzoda refused to tell Forum 18 on 5 May who ordered the beard-shaving campaign. He then claimed that the Ministry "did not ask the police to shave beards or to do anything about the beards". However, he continued, "we asked them to explain to people in public places about the national dress of Tajikistan".

Asked why police shaved off the men's beards if the Ministry did not order them to do so, and what exactly the police were told to explain, Umarzoda evaded Forum 18's questions on 5 May. He replied "we don't know why they did so" and claimed that "wearing a beard is not banned in Tajikistan". He then refused to speak further to Forum 18.

Officials of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18 on 29 April. SCRA Deputy Chair Solehjon Zavkiyev, who is in charge of work with mosques, put the phone down immediately Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered. Asked who Forum 18 could talk to about the cases, the secretary (who would not give her name) of new SCRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda claimed that Davlatzoda was busy. She referred Forum 18 instead to SCRA Deputy Chair Jumokhon Giyosov. However, his phones and those of other officials were not answered the same day.

Will police be disciplined?

Deputy Interior Minister Umarzoda played down the beard-shaving campaign, claiming on 29 April that "it is only two or three men whose beards were shaved". He also told Forum 18 then that "we are investigating these cases at the moment, and we will punish those who are responsible".

On 27 April Umarzoda claimed to Radio Free Europe's (RFE/RL) Tajik Service that two police officers from Sogd Region were disciplined for the beard-shaving, but denied this statement to Forum 18 on 28 April. The Deputy Interior Minister claimed that "the journalists overtook the events. I told them that we are investigating at the moment and we will punish the responsible officers if we find any fault". Umarzoda refused to state what if any punishments might be imposed.

Emin Jalilov, Head of Khujand Police in the capital of Sogd Region, on 28 April refused to discuss the beard-shavings with Forum 18. "Why don't you talk to the Interior Ministry about this?" he replied when Forum 18 asked about the cases. When Forum 18 asked whether any disciplinary measures were taken against the police officers concerned, Jalilov responded that "No measures were taken against any officers". He then refused to talk more to Forum 18.

Forced beard-shavings

Rustom Gulov, a Muslim blogger and human rights defender, was stopped in Khujand's Panjshanbethe Market on 2 April by three plain clothes police officers. They asked him his name and why he was wearing a beard. The Deputy Head of the Khujand Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Siyovush Saidov, a lower-ranking CID officer Khusrav (whose last name is not known) and a third police officer who also refused to show any identity took Gulov by police car to Khujand Police Station, Gulov told Forum 18 on 28 April.

As he was taken to the police car, "I managed to give my phone and personal items to a friend, and asked him if he could contact my lawyer."

Police then "forced me to sit in a chair and shaved off my beard". Human rights defender

Gulov estimated that possibly about 200 men had also been shaved, judging by the quantity of hair on the room's floor. He noted that many men have not publicly complained about the beard-shaving "for fear of the authorities".

Officers did not tell him why they forcibly shaved his beard, Gulov said. But on the way to the Police Station, officers asked him questions such as to which Islamic movement he belonged and what he thinks of dying as a Muslim martyr. "I wear a beard as part of the Islamic tradition, and I do not belong to any movement," Gulov explained to Forum 18. "My beard was not even a long one."

Gulov demanded that the police explain to him the legal grounds on which they stopped him and shaved his beard. "I told them that I will complain to higher authorities, that I will tell the media, and I will defend my rights. But they laughed at me and said very crude swear words to me." After the police finished shaving his beard off, Gulov refused to leave the building until his lawyer arrived and documented what happened. Police "went on laughing at me and insulting me, and told me that we will not let him in even if your lawyer comes."

Dilshod Jurayev, Gulov's lawyer, was not allowed into the Police Station, and had to wait outside.

Immediately after Gulov left the Police Station, he reported the incident to the Interior Ministry's Khujand Division which investigates citizens' complaints. The Khujand Division summoned Gulov on 10 April, eight days after the incident, and he wrote a statement about the incident. "The officials were polite to me this time", he told Forum 18. "However when I asked them what will be done to the officers, they said that they will only be reprimanded."

Saidov of Khujand CID, who detained Gulov, put the phone down on 28 April when Forum 18 asked why he and his colleagues detained Gulov and others and shaved off their beards. Subsequent calls to Saidov's phone on 28 April went unanswered.

"An indicator of the value of human dignity in Tajikistan"

Alluding to the Soviet-era slogan "My police protect me", Gulov wrote an open letter entitled "My police shave me" on 2 April in his blog blogiston.tj. It was addressed to President Rahmon, Prosecutor General Yusuf Rahmonov and Interior Minister Ramazon Rakhimzoda. Gulov recounted his experiences, noting that the police violated: "the Constitution, particularly Article 26 which guarantees freedom of religion; Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which also guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion; .. Article 9 of the International Covenant which prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; and Article 358, Part 1 of Tajikistan's Criminal Code which imposes responsibility for illegal detention."

Gulov concludes his letter by stating: "The results of the investigation of my complaints by the authorities will be an indicator of the value of human dignity in Tajikistan."

On 6 April, Dushanbe City CID invited Gulov to come to them for a "conversation". He asked if the talk could take place in Khujand as he lives in Khujand and is busy. Gulov said that "some time later Khujand CID officers summoned me".

The Khujand CID officers did not give their names at the meeting but told Gulov that there is a "negative comment insulting President Rahmon" on his blog. The officials told him that "because I did not report about the negative comment to the authorities, I could be considered as an accomplice in a crime". Gulov told them that he did not read all the comments on his blog and had not noticed that particular comment. He told the CID

officers that "I will erase it immediately". The CID released Gulov after he wrote a statement about the comment.

On 30 April, four weeks after posting his open letter on his blog, Gulov had received no written response from any official.

Asked when the Ministry will give a written response to Gulov on his complaint, Deputy Interior Minister Umarzoda told Forum 18 that "I already met and spoke to him in person. I assured him that we will investigate his case, and punish the officers responsible." Gulov confirmed to Forum 18 that he met the Deputy Minister on 27 April in Dushanbe, at a three-day roundtable discussion on community policing supported by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). "The Deputy Minister asked me if the police officers or anyone from the police had apologised to me." Gulov told him "No".

The roundtable was also supported by the US State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The US Ambassador to Tajikistan, Susan Elliott, commented at the event that: "Building a strong relationship between police and the people they serve, and giving those people a voice in law enforcement matters creates a transparent environment which contributes to the goals of reform and can only benefit the country".

Haj ban for under-35s

On April 13, Tajikistan banned people under 35 from going on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, RFE/RL reported on 14 April. It is unclear what impact the ban will have on current applicants to go on the haj, and the state via the SCRA and Council of Ulems controls who is allowed to go on the pilgrimage (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

The haj is an obligation at least once in their lifetime for Muslims who are not prevented from making the pilgrimage due to health or similar reasons. However, this did not stop the authorities from in 2009 imposing a ban on people younger than 16 and older than 80 could take part (see F18News 3 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1484).

Human rights defender Gulov told Forum 18 on 6 May that "there are many older people in the official queue. But not to allow any younger people to go on the haj is, by any human rights standards, violation and discrimination."

The SCRA claims that the under-35s ban was due to renovation works at Mecca being carried out by the Saudi authorities causing a 20 per cent reduction in the quota. Abdjalol Alizoda, who oversees the haj pilgrimage at the SCRA, did not answer his telephone on 6 May. An official at Saudi Arabia's Embassy in Dushanbe, who would not give his name, claimed to Forum 18 on 6 May that he would discuss this "in 20 minutes". But no phones at the Embassy have been answered since the 20 minutes have elapsed.

"Easy questions to answer" ?

Khayrullo Saidov, Secretary to Grand Mufti Saidmukarram Abdukodirzoda of the state-backed Council of Ulems, asked by Forum 18 when the ban will come into force and why the ban was imposed, replied on 6 May: "These are easy questions to answer, but you should call back after 2 pm when the Mufti will be back in the office."

Called back after 2 pm that day, Saidov claimed that "we are not competent to answer these questions". He then referred Forum 18 back to the SCRA.

SCRA officials (who refused to give their names) on 6 May refused to comment on the ban. One official who answered SCRA Chair Davlatzoda's phone, said the Chair is busy but Forum 18 "can talk to Deputy Chair Giyosov". Giyosov put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls to him went unanswered.

Devout Muslims claim crackdown in Tajikistan amid Syria fears

AFP (23.04.2015) - Rustam Gulov was walking in Khudzhand, a city in Central Asia's Tajikistan, when police detained him and took him to the station. By the time he came out, his beard had been shaved clean -- against his will.

Forcible shaving, restrictions on who can make the annual hajj pilgrimage and a campaign against hijabs are some of the elements in a crackdown on devout Muslims in ex-Soviet Tajikistan, whose secular authorities fear the growing influence of Islamist fighters returning from Syria.

"Judging by the hair in the room, I estimate they shaved the beards of approximately 200-250 people before me," Gulov, a well-known blogger, wrote in an open letter this month to Tajikistan President Emomali Rakhmon.

He said officers told him and another detainee that having a beard was against "state policy", saying they can "sodomise them and then shave their beards" after he complained.

Some Muslims say these allegations of forced beard shavings are part of a broader campaign against believers in the most impoverished country of the former Soviet Union, amid reports of its citizens fighting and dying for the jihadist Islamic State group in Syria.

A spokesman for the interior ministry denied that the government had ordered beards to be shaved, blaming it on officers "exceeding their remit", but confirmed that police could approach young bearded men to ensure "that they take care of themselves and observe personal hygiene."

Muslim believers complain repression has grown since controversial parliamentary elections last month handed a landslide victory to the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) and booted the moderate Islamic opposition out of parliament.

In a move that riled the faithful, the country's Committee for Religious and Cultural Issues declared last week a ban on people younger than 35 applying for the hajj pilgrimage, saying the decision was made "out of respect to the elderly" on the government-controlled waiting list.

"Everyday I pray to God that I might visit our sacred holy places. But now state officials have ruined my dreams," Maksadullo, 31, who works as a petty trader outside the capital Dushanbe, told AFP.

Over 6,000 Tajiks undertake the hajj every year, around a third of them under 35 according to the committee. Demand for the pilgrimage far outstrips the quota provided by Saudi Arabia and complaints of corruption in the process are frequent.

"Should this decision be taken by the government bureaucracy whose job it is to control all religious activity in the country or the Muslim community itself?" asked Felix Corley, editor of the Forum 18 News Service, which monitors religious freedom in the ex-Soviet republics.

"Everyone, whatever their age, has the right to freedom of religion or belief," Corely told AFP, noting that Tajikistan also restricts the public participation of minors in religious activities.

Rakhmon, the strongman president who oversaw the government's victory against a coalition of Islamist, regional and pro-democratic forces in a five-year civil war that ended in 1997, has complained about the rise of Middle Eastern influence in the country.

Last month he said that until recently Tajik women "never wore" the black clothing traditional in Arab states "even at funerals".

The mayor of Dushanbe said Monday the authorities will also conduct raids to make sure hijab headscarves are no longer imported or sold.

Authorities in the majority Muslim country are cagey about the roughly 300 citizens they claim are fighting alongside Islamic State group and affiliated jihadists. According to government data at least 50 citizens have died in Syria since the violence began.

Some recruits are suspected to have come from the roughly million Tajiks working as unskilled labourers in Russia, where the economic crisis exacerbated by the Ukraine conflict has put many out of work.

Last year Tajikistan blocked the video-sharing platform YouTube shortly after a video appeared showing five young men purporting to be Tajik nationals in Syria burning their Tajik passports.

Opponents say the authorities have extended their control over the religion and use imams in state-controlled mosques to rail against the opposition.

Despite the claims of a crackdown, the authorities say they are supportive of Islam and are building the biggest mosque in Central Asia to hold up to 100,000 believers.

Rakhmon, 62, consolidated his 22-year grip on power in disputed March elections that left the ruling PDPT without meaningful competition in the parliament and the country's largest opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) out in the cold.

Hijab ban and state-written sermons "only a recommendation"?

A senior official of the government's State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) has denied the existence of a state campaign against women wearing the Islamic headscarf, the hijab, which was launched by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon in early March. "I have not heard of any groups of officials going in public places anywhere in Tajikistan to speak against the hijab," Solehjon Zavkiyev, SCRA Deputy Chair in charge of Mosque affairs, claimed to Forum 18 News Service from the capital Dushanbe on 31 March. "It's

true that we would like our women to wear Tajikistan's traditional religious dress, but no one ever banned the hijab or spoke against it."

Officials have not stated why people are not free to wear the clothing of their choice, whether or not inspired by their faith, nor why government restrictions on clothing are applied only to women.

Concerns have also been raised by the requirement that imams of state-backed mosques read sermons at Friday prayers issued and distributed by the state authorities (see below).

Stopped at the kindergarten gate

Women were being stopped at kindergartens in March to be told that they should not drop off their children while wearing a hijab, sources who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 that month.

"We have received so many phone calls during the last week from women in various places in Dushanbe and outside that they were stopped on the street by officials and warned that they must not wear the hijab," Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 1 April.

Muzaffar Olimov, an expert of Sharq (Orient) sociological and political research centre in Dushanbe, also confirmed to Forum 18 the authorities' efforts against the hijab, at least in the country's two biggest cities, the capital Dushanbe and Khujand in the north. "I know of such attempts by the local Administrations in Dushanbe and Khujand," he told Forum 18 on 30 March. "But I am not aware that there is a widescale campaign across the country."

President launches campaign

The authorities' campaign against women wearing the hijab appears to have been launched by President Rahmon on 6 March, ahead of the 8 March official mothers' day holiday. He told a meeting with women of Dushanbe of his concern that "women and girls have appeared in society who wear black dresses uncharacteristic of Tajik culture and traditions," according to the text of his speech on the presidential website. He stated that some women wear such dresses "with the purpose to propagate radical ideas, and cultivate this fashion in our women and girls".

Although President Rahmon did not specifically mention hijabs, it was clear that this was the type of clothing he had in mind, Forum 18 notes.

Soon after the President's speech, state television showed footage of police stopping ten women in hijabs on the street, claiming they were prostitutes.

The Heads of Administrations of the cities of Dushanbe, Mahmadsaid Uboydulloev, and Khujand, Radjaboi Ahmadzoda, issued decrees on 27 March obliging their cities' authorities to work among women to prevent them from wearing hijabs, as well as warning vendors not to sell them.

An "operational" meeting of the Police at the Interior Ministry in Dushanbe was held on 28 March to follow up on the President's orders to counter the wearing of "alien clothing" by women, according to the Interior Ministry website. Deputy Interior Minister Alamshozoda Abdurahmon Alamsho complained of "propaganda to wear alien clothing among the female population in several regions of the country". Local police chiefs reported to the meeting on work in their area to carry out the President's orders.

Dushanbe City Administration officials refused to discuss the anti-hijab campaign with Forum 18 on 30 March.

Makhmudjon Dadoboyev, Press Secretary of Khujand City Administration, explained to Forum 18 on 31 March that Ahmadzoda's decree ordered groups of officials to "work among the population to propagate Tajikistan's traditional dress. And yes, they explain that the hijab is not traditional dress, but so far wearing the hijab is not banned." He claimed that "what officials tell people about the hijab is only a recommendation."

What will happen to those who continue to sell or wear hijabs?

Asked what will happen to those who ignore the authorities' instructions and continue selling or wearing hijabs or what measures the authorities will take in future, Dadoboyev of Khujand City Administration replied: "We have not thought about it, and I do not know what will be done about it."

Zavkiyev of the SCRA claimed that "women in Tajikistan are free to wear hijab, since there is no ban on it." He did not tell Forum 18 what measures the authorities will take against those who continue to sell or wear hijabs.

However, Sayfullozoda of the IRP expressed his concern. "The authorities are warning people now, but in the near future they will begin handing down punishments."

Two sermons with one target

Meanwhile, around the time of the 1 March Parliamentary elections, officials ordered imams in mosques throughout the country to read out two election texts attacking an opposition political party and praising the government.

On 27 February, the sermon apparently prepared by the SCRA was read – or at least partly read – during Friday prayers in Central Mosques. The text attacked the opposition IRP, praised President Rahmon and his People's Democratic Party (PDPT), and called on Muslims to vote only for candidates from Rahmon's Party.

After the elections – which were neither free nor fair – another SCRA written sermon called for the IRP to be closed down and for there to be only one party in the country.

The IRP is Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

The government has in recent years increased state control and repression of Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) is allowed to operate, all others having been closed. An imam fired by the SCRA in July 2013 remains unemployed, and in February 2014 the SCRA ordered sermons on one topic to be preached in every mosque where preaching is permitted by the state. Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It was a decision of the Council of Ulems", he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it" (see F18News 3 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1933).

"We have to vote for those whose work has achieved results"

"We have to vote for those whose work has achieved results", Eurasianet on 27 February quoted the three-page sermon delivered that day (and seen by Forum 18) as saying. "May God protect our head of state, who has devoted himself to saving our nation and

delivering us from our troubles." Without naming the IRP but in comments clearly understood in Tajikistan as directly attacking it, the text claimed: "Is it not this party that divided people?" It went on to claim that the IRP intends to restart the civil war that ended in 1997.

The Social-Democratic Party complained that "sermons delivered on 27 February by the state-funded Islamic Centre, criticising the IRPT and promoting the PDPT, compromised the secular nature of the state", an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission noted.

The government "boasts that it is a democratic and secular state", Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18. But, he asked, "where is the democracy and secularism when the state interferes in religious affairs, and dictates to mosques what to preach on?"

"An honest count could not be guaranteed"

The OSCE Election Observation Mission found that: "the 1 March parliamentary elections took place in a restricted political space and failed to provide a level playing field for candidates (..) restrictions on the right to stand, freedoms of expression and assembly, and access to media limited the opportunity to make a free and informed choice. The elections were not administered in an impartial manner (..) significant shortcomings were noted, including multiple voting and ballot box stuffing. The disregard of counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed".

Civil society organisations, even those not working on overtly political issues, spoke to a human rights defender known to Forum 18 of a climate of fear before the elections.

President Rahmon's PDPT has 51 out of the total of 63 deputies in the new parliament and the IRP has no deputies.

"Let there be only one effective party"

Four weeks later on 27 March, also during Friday prayers, another pre-written SCRA sermon was read in mosques across the country. The text Forum 18 has seen claims the 1 March elections showed overwhelming support for Rahmon's party, attacks the IRP as a threat to society, and encourages Muslims to call on the central government to initiate a referendum to close the IRP down. The text states "let there be only one effective party in Tajikistan".

Unlike the 27 February sermon, which was unsigned, the 27 March sermon was signed by Abdurahmon Mavlanov, who is thought to work for the SCRA.

"Many central mosques across Tajikistan just read the preamble of the letter, where the name of our Party is not given explicitly," Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18. But, he continued, "several central mosques in Dushanbe and in Sogd Region, including two mosques in Khujand, read the whole letter".

Government officials in the municipal administrations of Khujand and Istaravshan District in Sogd Region refused to comment to Forum 18 on either of the recent pre-written sermon texts.

"Fake" SCRA sermons?

"Pre-written sermons are prepared by the Islamic Centre [the state-backed body controlling Islam in the country]," SCRA Deputy Chair in charge of work with mosques Zavkiyev claimed to Forum 18. "This is normal policy in many major Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia." However, he insisted that the texts it and other human rights and

media organisations have seen are "fake". "The real sermons did not include any support for the President or his Party, or attack the IRP."

Zavkiyev of the SCRA would not state whether Mavlonov also works for the SCRA. But Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18 that "we know that Mavlonov works for the SCRA. Our members and other people who have listened to these sermons in mosques have told us about this". The IRP had sight of the SCRA-prepared 27 March sermon – which as is usual attempts to disguise its origin by not using the SCRA letterhead – before it was read in mosques. For fear of state reprisals he could not reveal the source that supplied the sermon, but was confident that it is reliable.

Deputy Grand Mufti Haji Nigmatullo Olimov and other officials of the state-backed Council of Ulems and Islamic Centre declined to discuss the sermons with Forum 18 on 31 March. Deputy Grand Mufti Olimov has previously denied that imams cannot preach their own sermons and must deliver pre-written texts from the Council of Ulems (see F18News 3 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1933).

"It is not surprising that imams in central mosques read the sermons," Olimov of the Sharq research centre commented to Forum 18. "The imams of the 365 central mosques across Tajikistan receive salaries from the government. They are expected by the government to carry out the government's policy." He also noted that the Sharq Centre's research had found that over 70 per cent of the population saw no threat to the country from the IRP.

Consequences for imams who refuse to read SCRA texts

Zakiyev of the SCRA claimed that orders to imams to read out sermons are "not compulsory but only a recommendation". Asked whether there are any punishments or other consequences for imams who refuse to read the pre-written sermons, he claimed: "Imams are also free to prepare their own sermons".

However, Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18 that he knows of imams who have been fired for refusing to read pre-written sermons. One example he gave was Imam Khodji Mirzo Ibronov of the Central Mosque in Külob in the south west of the country.

Ubaydullo Khasanov, who was Chief Imam in Vossei District of the south-western Khatlon Region, was dismissed on the SCRA's instructions for allegedly giving "false information to the President" (see F18News 3 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1933).

The state-backed Council of Ulems appoints imams, increasing the state's control of imams (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553)

Imams of Tajik mosques are urged to call for closure of Islamic Revival Party

Interfax (30.03.2015) <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=11927>-
The loss of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan in the recent parliamentary elections shows that this party has no support in Tajik society and it should be disbanded, a speech recommended for imams for reading at this coming Friday's prayer reads.

The recommended text for Friday sermons is sent weekly by the Council of Ulems of Tajikistan with the approval of the Tajik government's committee on religious affairs.

Despite the fact that it is called "recommended," its use in Friday sermons is essentially obligatory.

"People have chosen a party whose work they could see with their own eyes. People did not vote for the Islamic party or other parties that give promises and do not fulfill them.

People have realized everything. The loss of the Islamic party shows that no one supports the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan anymore, except for some supporters," the text of the recommended sermon, which has been published by several independent media in Tajikistan, says.

"The parliamentary elections showed that people do not need the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan. For this reason, I suggest that the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan should be closed. Thank Allah, we are Muslims and it's enough for us, we don't need an Islamic party," says the speech that the head of every Tajik mosque will be required to say in this coming Friday. Parliamentary elections were held in Tajikistan on March 1. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan did not get any mandates in the elections, for the first time in the country's history. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan said the elections were rigged in favor of the People's Democratic Party, which is led by incumbent President Emomali Rahmon. Western election monitors agreed with that.

"Let's ask the country's government to legally close this party. Maybe they will hold a referendum where people will vote and say they do not need an 'Islamic' party in the country," the recommended text of the sermon says.

The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan told Inter fax they know about the text and are now working on an official statement.

The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan has over 40,000 members and is the second largest political party in the country and one of the republic's two largest opposition parties. In the years of the 1992-1997 civil war, the Islamic Revival Party was the driving force of the United Tajik Opposition that fought the so-called People's Front, which brought President Rahmon to power.

Besides the Islamic Revival Party, the United Tajik Opposition comprised many democratic forces. The Islamic Revival Party says it is looking to increase the role of religion in society and is not looking to make Tajikistan into an Islamic state.

Eleven Salafis detained in Tajikistan

Interfax (09.02.2015) -Dushanbe, February 9, Interfax -Eleven people have been detained in Tajikistan on suspicion of membership in the Islamic Salafi group, which is classed as extremist in Tajikistan, the press service for the Tajik Interior ministry reported on Monday.

"The eleven citizens of Tajikistan detained in the Sogdiysk Region are suspected of membership in the extremist group Salafi," the press service said.

"As a rule, people who join Salafis are young people who received religious education in countries such as the UAE, Pakistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia," the press service reported.

In December 2014, a court in southern Tajikistan sentenced four members of the group to six years in prison. The convicts were aged between 30 and 35. Twelve Salafis were convicted in September 2014.

The Salafi movement emerged in the 18th century. It promotes the interpretation of Islam "in the way the Prophet saw it," denying any changes made to the religion during contacts between Islamic states and the western world. The Muslim Brotherhood movement, which is banned in Egypt, is a Salafi movement. Salafis are the dominant majority in Saudi Arabia.

In secular countries, specifically in Central Asian countries, Salafism is considered an extremist movement due to Salafis' intolerance of follows of non-Muslims and Muslims who they believe have the wrong interpretation of Islam.

In 2014, the Tajik Supreme Court officially found the Salafi movement to be extremist.

Salafism is a crime under Article 198 of the Tajik Criminal Code (inciting ethnic, racial, local or religious feud).
