

Tajikistan: Husbands demand wives wear head covers, government demands removing

Ferghana News (02.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2mB5AcY> – The situation around satr, a locally used term for hijab, or headscarf, is becoming ever more controversial in Tajikistan. Only a few years ago the Tajik society was rather tolerant toward satr with the male part of it encouraging women to wear Islamic attire. But lately, mostly thanks to the Tajik authorities' efforts, the society has gradually started espousing suspicious attitudes toward this Islamic piece of clothing. In the imagination of Tajik authorities, men sporting beards or women wearing headscarves are initial steps toward radicalisation and extremism. Even though Article 26 of the country's constitution reads that "each person has the right to independently determine her/his religious preference, to practice any religion alone or in association with others or to practice no religion, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals and ceremonies", wearing satr is not openly welcomed by the authorities; doing so triggers persecutions in certain cases. That said, even those human rights advocates who used to make bold statements about human rights violations are remaining silent.

During a meeting with students of the National University back in 2010, President Emomali Rakhmon was very critical about women wearing hijabs: "Watching young people, especially young ladies and women in the capital, I can see that some [of them] are copying the style of clothing [practiced] in other countries". He has then seemingly jokingly threatened: "If any one among you prefers the dress style of a different country, then I will send you [there]". Speaking during a meeting with

female activists on March 6, 2015, the president has again brought up the topic of the hijabs, and cited a historical fact: "According to scientific and ethnographic sources, our people had beautiful clothes for women since ancient times. Our women and girls never wore black clothes. Black clothes are traditionally discouraged. You all know well that even mourning clothes of our people are not black. However, some Tajik girls and women are wearing black; they don't know and even don't want to know the history and purpose of such garments. According to some sources, girls and women clad in completely black clothes are visiting the funerals of complete strangers and trying to propagate different ideas that are alien to our ancient history and culture among women there," the president claims.

The head of state's repeated speeches critical of such behaviour did eventually have an impact. For instance, in April 2015, Dushanbe Mayor Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev decreed to seize from all stores in the city "all clothes that are alien to the Tajik nation's culture of garments" especially women's clothes. And then came the banning of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan later the same year. The official ban then led to persecutions of women wearing satr with renewed vigour: Police districts, national security agencies and prosecutors' offices joined the effort. And our officials are known for their extra zealousness when their interests are concerned: Even though the president was only talking about women and girls wearing black cloths, they started pressuring everyone who would don a headscarf "a-la Muslim" whatever its colour may be.

Nonetheless, despite all prohibitions of wearing and retailing satr, numbers of women wearing it are not diminishing. Many believing women in Tajik simply cannot fathom appearing in public with their hair and necks exposed. After all, satr is an obligatory attribute of clothing according to Islamic teachings. Several Tajik women spoke with Fergana to discuss

why they prefer satr and are not prepared to remove it.

Manzura Maksudova of Kulyab maintains that many satr-clad women do so not necessarily for religious reasons but more as a nod to fashion: "It seems to me this is following fashion and [desire for] beautiful clothes. Mass donning of satr started in Tajikistan after *Clone*, a colourful and unforgettable Brazilian soap opera, was aired in Russian early 2004. The Tajik audience, just like everyone else in the post-Soviet space, loved watching Russian TV channels. The protagonist is Jadi, a dazzling Muslim woman from Morocco. She used to wear beautiful oriental clothes all the time. A lot of Tajik women liked that, so they started seeking out similar clothes in local marketplaces. Some received such clothes from their relatives visiting the Middle East. And, naturally, businessmen started importing such clothes given the public appetite. So women and girls started wearing colourful clothes and donning "Oriental" headscarves. It seems to me they, many of them anyway, would have voluntarily stopped wearing them if not all these prohibitions. As is known, prohibitions always cause the opposite reactions".

Muhabbat Ziyoyeva of Dushanbe would not wear satr if it weren't her husband's condition: "When I was a [college] student, I used to wear clothes like everyone else did in town. I would not even think of satr until I was engaged. My would-be husband's parents demanded nothing when they came to my parents asking for my hand. It was him who demanded at the very first meeting that I put satr on. I liked that young man right away, so I thought to myself 'why not'? And now not a single day without satr. I can wear colourful clothes at home, but I must not attract attention in public. Of course, wearing satr is annoying sometimes. Women wear various kinds of clothes in this city. But I don't want to upset my husband, so I will have to wear this all my life".

The parents of Zaynura Obiyeva put satr on her when she was 13. Other girls in school would wear more traditional headscarves and Zaynura was in satr. "I am a good obedient daughter. How can one disobey their parents' will? That is sin. And I have myself grown used to covering up. I am more comfortable like this. Nobody bothers me when I'm out [in public]. I am treated with respect, not like those women who are open [covering up less]. They are harassed and they hear various dirty things. They are touched, groped and look at with lust. That is simply bad manners".

Zamira Musoyeva is a girl of principles. She has conscientiously chosen to wear satr. "I was going through a very difficult period in my life. I was in depression for a very long time. I read a lot of Islamic literature at the time, including many books by Shamil Alauddin [a preacher and cleric in Russia]. He explains Islam in a very easy to understand manner—something I have not heard from our religious figures. They only scare and prohibit. I closed [presumably: my entire body with clothes] gradually. Initially I only wore the headscarf. And then I gradually moved on to satr. I feel comfortable in satr. Although no one was expecting this from me because I didn't used to wear even national clothes".

Madina Islamova is lenient toward women in satr. She prefers "European" style of clothes. "I am a Muslim by birth. I read the commentaries of the Koran by Valeriya Porohova. But I will say it openly to you: I am not very religious. I love philosophy of Ghandi and Dalai Lama. But religion is not a dogma for me. I believe Ghandi's words: 'God has no religion.' I think living with [peaceful] conscience is actually what religion is. Obviously, external attributes are not an indicator of the true faith. Faith lives in one's soul. But I do respect the women's choice and their right to wear satr. Having the right to choose is the most important for humans. So if she wants, she'll take [satr] off; if she wants, she'll

keep it on. That does not annoy me. People and their opinion must be obligatorily respected in a secular and lawful society”.

Zarina Mirzokulova argues that belief in God is a spiritual condition. “People believe the way they feel. The majority of women wear satr, most likely, because they are coerced. Others started wearing unconsciously. Many fell for the tribal instinct: ‘Everybody is wearing so I will wear as well to be like everyone else.’ And now those who put it on unconsciously are taking it off under the pretext of ‘they are prohibiting it now.’ And there are few among those who are still wearing it that came to this consciously. I am tolerant toward women wearing satr. But I don’t like those women in satr who believe they are saints and brag about it; they try teaching others to wear it even though they have no spiritual themselves. Unfortunately, the majority are such [women]. There are none—I don’t see them anyway—who would correctly interpret Islam. Nobody wants to go deep into it. There is very little love in this generation, more fear”.

Nazira Mulloyeva, a public activist, often deals with the problems of women and sees men’s fault in the lack of women’s rights. “To put it mildly, men are feudal lords in our country. Men never liked the European style of women’s clothes. Men, including male officials, have always been unsatisfied with such clothes. I think they like it when women are covered up and tacitly encourage doing so. Men usually dictate things. Women oblige; they have no rights in our country. When women started wearing satr, men encouraged that. And now we have new prohibitions with the authorities demanding women take it off. Yet another prohibition. So the male portion of our society is coercing women to put satr on, while the government is prohibiting [doing so]. The woman is between two fires now. The government should first combat the male chauvinism rather than women in satr”.

The issue of satr is very sensitive for Sayram Murodova. She

believes women are forced to wear satr because wearing European-style clothes is now becoming dangerous even in the city's centre. "The situation my acquaintance's daughter found herself in is a testimony to that. The event happened in evening time last summer. She and her friends—attractive and beautiful—were in a cafe with their male course mates. Then they were headed home, preparing to cross a street. A black vehicle drove up close. The windows were rolled down and occupants started spitting and throwing plastic bottles at the girls. That was unexpected, so the girls were startled. One of the young men in the car has contemptuously called them unbelievers and used profanities. The girls couldn't recover from this for a long time. That is what illiteracy and radicalism is. Nobody explains to them Islam correctly. What is also saddening is that there are many illiterate ones like them unfortunately, whose vision of Islam is expressed in such an aggressive manner. It is saddening that they believe they are on the right path. Islam is a religion of light, and the fanatics are making it dark. This leads to a radical treatment of women, whereas there is no such teaching in the Koran. And they listen to various false preachers and don't want to enlighten themselves".

Zebo Kabirova, a marketplace vendor, wears satr as a form of protest of the governmental prohibition. She often finds herself in the vision field of law-enforcement agents. "They tried everything to force me into taking satr off: they pleaded and threatened and took to their police station. But who are they to prohibit? I like [satr], so I'll continue wearing it. I'll take it off whenever I wish to do so".

Aziza Toirova is a spouse of a religious figure. She has been wearing satr for a very long time now. She is a very talented person who graduated from a secular university with honours. "I write poems and read them to my husband. He is my only audience and critic. I work a lot on self-education—computers, languages. Nobody forces me to wear satr as I it is my

personal choice. I am a homemaker and bringing my children up. But that doesn't mean that I am deprived of joy of communicating with my friends. We often meet both as families and individually. They don't wear satr and maintain a different lifestyle. Nonetheless, they understand me. But a complete prohibition will always cause a reaction; that's human nature. We clearly see a crisis of education and upbringing in our society. The education system and enlightenment must be invested in with money. [Presumably: the government] needs to explain, bring up and educate, [instead of] forcibly prohibiting [satr]".

While this article was being prepared for publication, Fergana learnt from several sources in the Tajik government that state-funded institutions are orally instructed to record personal information of women in satr when they apply for government services and report them to [presumably: law-enforcement and national security] agencies.

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