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UZBEKISTAN: Is headscarf ban "enlightened" Islam?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Insisting that all women who wear a Muslim headscarf (the hijab) have links with terrorists, the authorities in Lagman, part of Karshi in southern Uzbekistan, have banned the public wearing of the hijab, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. City authorities have claimed to Forum 18 that "anyone in Uzbekistan can wear whatever they consider appropriate," even though Uzbekistan's religion law bans the public wearing of undefined "religious clothing", which attacks both Muslims and Hare Krishna devotees. Abdurakhman Erkeyev, head of the city's secretariat for social and economic issues went on to tell Forum 18 that "We have asked the mahalla authorities to explain to people that the essence of Islam in Uzbekistan has never been distinguished by fanaticism and extremism. We feel that it is very important to promote this form of "enlightened" Islam."

Women are being banned by the authorities from wearing the hijab (a headscarf covering the hair and neck) in public in Karshi [Qarshi], southern Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has been told on 27 August. This ban follows similar actions against the religious freedom of Muslim women in both the capital Tashkent, and also in Pskent, a town near Almalyk [Olmalik] about 100 km [62 miles] east of Tashkent, where police detained 25 women for more than 24 hours for wearing the hijab (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298). The action against the religious freedom of devout Muslim women in Karshi is taking place at the same time as ongoing trials of devout Muslim men from the region (see eg. F18News 27 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=401).

The new ban in the Lagman mahalla of Karshi was enforced after both the terrorist attacks in Tashkent at the end of March and beginning of April, and was reiterated after the 30 July attacks. Straight after the terrorist attacks all the mahalla committees held meetings with residents, following an order from the city authorities. Mahallas are the smallest territorial division in Uzbekistan. (See F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58 for explanation of the role of mahallas). Mahalla officials have previously been used by the police in actions against religious believers (see 16 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=395).

At the meeting held at the Lagman mahalla, the head of the mahalla committee, Kuzi Jurayev, said that all women who wore the hijab had links with terrorists and that in future he would not allow women to wear this sort of clothing in his mahalla. Sharipova and Baikhanova claim that meetings have been held in the mahalla every two weeks since then, and each time the mahalla administration reiterates that it is unacceptable for women to appear in public places wearing the hijab.

The ban has a prehistory as, under Article 14 of Uzbekistan's religion law, the wearing of religious clothing is forbidden in public. The term "religious clothing" is not defined in the law but, in practice, the ban mainly affects Muslims, men being fearful of appearing obviously devout by wearing a beard and clothes that are traditional to Islamic cultures, and women fearing that wearing the hijab in public will expose them to discrimination or worse. The "religious clothing" ban also affects

religious minorities, Hare Krishna devotees having complained to Forum 18 that they cannot wear robes or a sari in public (see F18News 16 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105).

In Karshi, Forum 18 has been told by human rights activist Tulkin Karayev of two specific examples of Muslim women in the Lagman mahalla, Gavkhar Sharipova and Dirofruz Baikhanova, believing that they must stay at home because of the ban on public wearing of the hijab.

"No-one is stopping women from wearing the hijab, but after the terrorist attacks in March and April we received an order from the city administration recommending that we carry out preventative work with women to deter them from wearing the hijab in public," Tulkin Karayev was told on 26 August in Karshi by the head of the Lagman mahalla committee, Dilor Norov.

On 27 August, the head of the secretariat for social and economic issues at the Karshi city administration, Abdurakhman Erkeyev, admitted to Forum 18 that the city had instructed the mahalla committees to carry out "preventative work" among the population. "We have asked the mahalla authorities to explain to people that the essence of Islam in Uzbekistan has never been distinguished by fanaticism and extremism. We feel that it is very important to promote this form of "enlightened" Islam. But we have never tried to dictate what people should wear. Anyone in Uzbekistan can wear whatever they consider appropriate," Erkeyev told Forum 18.

Karayev has insisted to Forum 18, however, that "the city administration has given mahalla committees a secret instruction to try and persuade women not to wear the hijab in public. Whether the heads of mahalla committees in general are trying to put as much pressure on women as the Lagman mahalla is another matter. But since the terrorist attacks in April a lot of women have complained to me that going out in public wearing the hijab is now being interpreted as a distinct challenge to the authorities' policy," Karayev told Forum 18 on 27 August in Tashkent.

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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