

Azerbaijan: Muslim Girls Challenge the State

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A few hundred devout Muslim women are fighting the Azerbaijani state for the right to wear headscarves

The latest chapter in the row over religious identity erupted in Azerbaijan's state medical university on May 2, when Musa Alekperov, a teacher of social hygiene, noticed that one of his students was wearing a headscarf and gave her an ultimatum - either get rid of it or leave the lecture-hall.

Senuber Saidi, who covers her head out of religious conviction, chose the second option. Then she turned to the Centre for the Defence of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Toleration, known in Azeri as DEVAMM.

According to the head of the centre, Ilgar Ibragimoglu, students from the city's pedagogical university and the financial college had recently appealed to him with similar complaints, claiming that teachers had advised them to come "dressed like the others".

Over the last month, the rights of observant Islamic girls and Azerbaijan's aspiration to be a secular state have clashed in dramatic form, provoking a row on a national scale. Azerbaijan is following the model of its Turkic cousin, Turkey, and cracking down on any manifestation of radical Islam.

Devout Muslim women have insisted on their rights to wear shawls in Azerbaijan for more than three years now. The problem first occurred when the interior minister began issuing new Azerbaijani passports in 1998 and demanded that women be photographed with their heads uncovered.

Holders of the passports were to be photographed "without headwear", which officials took to include shawls. In spite of several legal challenges in favour of the women's rights, Azerbaijan's supreme court ruled in favour of the government.

Around 200 women refused to agree to this and asked for political asylum from the United Nations and western embassies. According to Ibragimoglu, this number is growing and it is possible that thousands of women will reject their Azerbaijani citizenship as a result.

For its part, the government has stepped up its campaign against Islamic students. On May 3, a conference on the theme of "Women and Islam" was held in Baku state university at which a string of speakers called for women to come to lectures with their heads uncovered. The women themselves were not allowed to speak.

Rafik Aliiev, the head of the state committee on religion, told the conference, "We are talking about the attributes of a secular state, which are accepted by the whole world."

On May 28, the education minister, Misir Mardanov, struck a more conciliatory note on state television saying, "No one is preventing the girls from coming to classes with covered heads. It's not right to remove their scarves by force or to force them to come to lectures." Mardanov said that his ministry was "studying" the problem.

However, one teacher at the pedagogical university, Gulnara Shadlinskaya, told IWPR that, despite these

emollient words, she believed there was a secret agreement between the ministry and the universities to pursue an "anti-religious campaign".

The human rights activists from DEVAMM said that when they came to talk to the university authorities they were treated with hostility. "Only after that did we get to talk to Musa Alekperov," said Seimur Rashidov, one of the activists.

"In conversation with us he renounced his words. It seemed that he had absolutely no problem with Senuber Saidi coming with a covered head. He had only one condition that a student in the medical institute should wear a white cap, which Saidi had not objected to."

However, Islamic girls studying in the medical university were told they would not be allowed into class after May 10 wearing shawls. DEVAMM activists who accompanied the students into their lessons on that day said they encountered no opposition - but the following day the girls experienced more of the same trouble.

According to Shadlinskaya, the university authorities compile a list of students who wear headscarves. Each one is then invited to a confidential conversation where she is strongly advised to "come dressed like the others". If that does not work, they are given a deadline to get rid of their shawls. The students are currently sitting exams and many fear they will be unable to concentrate properly if such disruptions continue.

The university conflict may soon be put in the shade by a possible clash over national identity cards that are being introduced in Azerbaijan later this year.

Young women who are leaving secondary schools or colleges and do not want to be photographed bareheaded for religious reasons will not be issued with the IDs. This would stop them going into higher education and leave them extremely vulnerable in society at large.

It would seem that there is more work on the horizon for DEVAMM and Ibrahimoglu, who predicts, "This is a calm before the storm."

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