

## **Tajikistan: Keeping Up With the Neighbours**

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Tajiks ignore concerns expressed by government and Islamic figures and spend every penny they earn or borrow on lavish weddings and funerals.

In Tajikistan, birth, marriage and death are only part of a complex series of family and religious events that need to be marked - but celebrating them in the way that neighbours and relatives expect leads many families to ruin.

Caught between tradition - not always of great antiquity - and economic hardship, poor families are finding themselves increasingly pressured to host events that are way beyond their means.

Shahlo Rabieva is typical of the better-off class of people who have set the tone and style for others in recent years. For her wedding last summer, the groom's parents gave her two chests full of dresses, gold jewellery worth 1,500 US dollars, and gifts for her sisters, parents and even distant relatives. The wedding party were whisked away to an expensive restaurant in a convoy of 20 luxury cars.

In a country where two out of three people live below the breadline, few can match this kind of expenditure. Yet they still feel obliged to try. In the Soviet period, celebrations linked to Islam were especially frowned on, but after independence in 1991 many people started reviving the old traditions - and inventing some new ones along the way.

For a start, there are the annual holidays - Eid al-Fitr at the end of Ramadhan and Eid al-Adha or Kurban Bairam. Then there are circumcisions and the whole cycle of formal events surrounding marriage and death. These are celebrated on an increasingly lavish scale, and new celebrations such as marking the birthdays of long dead relatives have appeared.

As a result, families are placed under an increasing obligation to spend every available penny on keeping up with tradition.

Orzu Hamidov recalled how his father insisted on spending all his earnings on his wedding.

"My father worked in Russia for several years and saved up money. He spent about 5,000 dollars on my wedding," he said. "With that kind of money, we could have lived modestly for three years or bought furniture for the house.

"But my father decided that the priority was to hold the kind of wedding that would make the in-laws, numerous relatives and guests happy - about 300 people in all. Now he has left the country to work again, and we are waiting for him to send money back, as I have a [monthly] salary of just 20 dollars and my wife doesn't work."

Akmal Umarov cannot afford to get married even though he is over 30 - way past the normal age for Tajik men to find a wife. He has spent the last ten years working as a migrant labourer abroad to maintain a household of 11 back in Tajikistan.

“I had to send money to my parents’ house..., then help to marry off my sisters and my elder brother. The wedding costs are rising, and now I need several thousand [dollars] but I can’t save it up, because my relatives are constantly asking for money for various celebrations and ceremonies,” he said.

“Here in Russia, people are much richer but no one spends as much as we do.”

Social pressure can drive people who are already poor deep into financial ruin.

Guldasta Sharipova, who lives in the Vakhsh district in southern Tajikistan, is only 32, but her emaciated face and cracked, rough hands make her look much older.

“My husband died a year ago, leaving me with four children,” she told IWPR. “Our mullah came along that day and helped me and my neighbours to organise the funeral, for which we slaughtered our only cow. The mullah told me that I would have to hold a memorial wake like this every week. I was surprised, because in the past we held a wake after 40 days, and then once a year.

“But I had to obey so as not to face censure from the mullah and the people here. I’ve held seven wakes now, and we’ve slaughtered all the sheep and cows, so the children don’t get milk and we don’t eat enough. But every Thursday I hold a wake, so I borrow money, gather firewood in the mountains, and ask my relatives for help. I don’t know what will happen to us now, we have become completely impoverished.”

Although many people are worried at the trend, few are willing to buck convention, so they would rather see orders issued from on high for the spending to stop.

President Imomali Rahmonov has spoken out about the waste on several occasions, and has in the past banned the holding of time-consuming ceremonies on weekdays.

One of his regional governors has gone much further. Kasym Kasymov, in charge of the Sogd region in the north of Tajikistan, issued guidelines last November detailing how many guests should be invited to the wedding, even how many dresses the groom’s family should give the bride.

Islamic figures say the way Muslim rituals are observed in Tajikistan is a local distortion of true religious tenets.

“The laws of Islam do not prescribe large outgoings. On the contrary, the Koran says that Allah does not expect a person to exceed his capabilities,” said Umarali Nazarov, rector at the Islamic University in the capital Dushanbe. “But people are scared of censure from relatives, neighbours and acquaintances, so they hold lavish celebrations.”

Nazarov said that whereas Tajiks who completed the pilgrimage to Mecca held parties before and afterwards where they handed out gifts, Egyptian scholars whom he had studied under recommended merely bringing back water from the holy spring of Zemzem to hand out.

Nazarov's colleague at the university, Nigmatullo Sukhbatov, says, "If people read the Koran and acted according to the words of the Prophet, they would give assistance to orphans, invalids and the poor; they would repair schools, build roads and bridges."

The government committee in charge of religious affairs estimates that people in Tajikistan spend about 300 million dollars a year marking the various religious ceremonies.

"With the low standard of living, this outlay is not normal," said the committee's deputy chairman Tohir Rashidov. "Many people take out loans, and then have to leave the country for seasonal work to repay them."

Both the Islamic University and the religious committee are campaigning for a reduction in spending levels.

But despite this kind of encouragement, people seem to be bound by pressures from within their communities.

Olim and Anora Karimov, who live in the southern village of Vakhsh, look on in dismay at the spending going on around them.

Speaking of one neighbour, Olim said, "Their children don't go to school because they don't have clothes or textbooks, but they held a wedding for the entire area, slaughtered a large ox and partied for three days. He doesn't have permanent work, and only gets by with odd jobs and [money from] his younger brother who works in Moscow."

Anora recalled how she was recently invited to an all-women ceremony in memory of a deceased person, "All the women were well-dressed with expensive jewellery. Not one of them showed any trace of grief. If I hadn't known what the occasion was, I would have thought it was a fashion show or a party."

Valentina Kasymbekova, IWPR correspondent in Dushanbe.

**Location:** Tajikistan  
Stavropol  
Russia  
North Ossetia

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