

Tajikistan: No Headscarves, Please

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Muslim women say officials are refusing to give them passports if their photo shows them in a headscarf.

Women wearing Muslim headscarves in Tajikistan say they face discrimination from officials who insist their passport photographs should be taken bare-headed.

Hafiza, a resident of Khujand in northern Tajikistan's Soghd region, told IWPR that officials at the local passport office refused to process her application when she submitted a photo of herself in a headscarf, even though she protested that she was wearing it for religious reasons.

Concern at the headscarf ban in official photos appears to be widespread among devout Muslims. When Islamic clerics raised the conference on law and religion in late April, participants reported cases from many parts of Tajikistan.

The deputy head of the Islamic Rebirth Party in Soghd region, Husainzoda Salohiddinov, told IWPR that the party has received a petition with over 100 signatures on it from women who object to the ban.

The passport offices - which are part of the police - say they are just following orders from the interior ministry. Although the headscarves cover the hair only, the passport officers say they obscure too much of the face and make identification difficult.

Some women give in and agree to be photographed without their headscarves. "I am a believer and I always wear a headscarf, but the passport office wouldn't allow me to get a passport with a photo in which I'm wearing a headscarf," said a student at Dushanbe's Islamic Institute, who asked not to be named. "I had to have my picture taken with my head uncovered."

Bakhtior Kobilov, head of the passport division in Isfara - a part of Tajikistan where Islamic feeling runs high - told IWPR that the rules could not be waived for anyone.

But Abduhakim Sharipov, head of the regional office of social and cultural affairs in Soghd region, of which Isfara is part, took a more conciliatory line, saying, "There are certain requirements for passport photos, but at the same time this problem is a human rights issue. It is impossible to prevent women wearing headscarves in these photographs."

According to legal expert Samye Maksudov, there is no law governing what can and cannot be worn. "Everybody has the right to wear clothing in accordance with their beliefs," he said. "Under current legislation they can lodge an appeal in the courts if they are prevented from doing so."

While the controversy mainly affects devout Muslims for whom the headscarf is an expression of faith, other Tajik women in this overwhelmingly Muslim society complain that they are not allowed to be photographed with their heads covered as part of the traditional dress which is common among rural and older women.

"I wear national dress and cannot imagine myself in any other clothing," said Oynihol, a woman from Matcha, a highland rural area. "No one stops girls from wearing short tops exposing their midriffs, or tight trousers."

Juma Niyozov, chairman of the Democratic Party's branch in Soghd, says the bureaucratic restrictions seem all the more perverse since women travelling to Saudi Arabia to perform the Haj are regularly issued with passports complete with a photo showing them with heads covered.

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