

Tajikistan's Latest Crackdown on Tradition

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Lavish ceremonies to mark major life events will now be curtailed by law.

When Mavluda Mirzoeva buried her husband on August 7 this year, she planned a sequence of traditional rituals as part of the mourning process.

One of these was to be a lavish feast to which more than 200 neighbours, relatives and friends would be invited to honour her late husband. A vast pilaf cooked in a nearby restaurant would feed male guests in the morning, with women invited later in the day.

However, before Mirzoeva could carry out her traditional responsibilities as a widow, the Tajik parliament introduced a legal crackdown on such ceremonies.

On August 23, the lower chamber of the country's parliament introduced 11 amendments to the laws that already regulate traditional celebrations and ceremonies – but are rarely enforced.

The changes, introduced on the initiative of President Emomali Rahmon, mean that rituals such as the slaughter of cattle have been banned from commemorations traditionally held on the third and fortieth days after death, as well as on the anniversary.

Families are now only allowed to offer a modest amount of refreshments at the mourning ceremonies, with no excessive food.

Those who contravene these laws face fines of 30,000 somoni (3,370 US dollars) or 40,000 somoni (4,490 dollars) for government officials.

This meant that Mirzoeva had no choice but to host the commemorations in her own home.

“My husband’s friends and colleagues continue to come to our house. They pray for the deceased. My dastarkhan [meal setting] is prepared. I offer tea and shurpo [a traditional soup] to all those who want to express their condolences. And so it happens every day,” she said.

In actual fact, Mirzoeva continued, the new regulations meant she had been forced to spend far more money.

“It would have been easier for our family to hold a funeral feast on the appointed day and spend the money for organisation of one single event. Now we have to spend much more money, every day,” the widow said.

Although officials argue the moves are intended to spare people from the financial pressures of traditional ceremonies, others interpret them as yet another unwelcome intrusion by an authoritarian state into citizen’s private lives.

The legislation also includes clauses requiring people to “observe the attributes of the national culture, speak the state language and wear national clothes”. This last has been widely seen as part of a longer-running campaign to deter women from wearing the Islamic headscarf, although the terms by which violations may be punished remains unclear.

(See **No Hijab, Please, We're Tajik**).

Rahmon himself insisted that the intention was to reduce unnecessary expenditures and thus raise Tajikistan’s standard of living, although he also made his opposition to overt Islamic symbols clear.

“The Almighty is to be reached with mind and worshiped by heart, not by the dress, satr [headscarf], hijab, turban or beard,” the president told a public meeting on July 11.

The changes extend to a whole host of other traditional practices.

Circumcisions, previously often celebrated with great fanfare, must now be carried out within 20 days of the boy’s birth in a medical facility with only family members invited and with no musicians or performers.

Restrictions have also been levied on celebrations marking the return of pilgrims from Mecca and Medina.

Shokirjon Hakimov, deputy chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan, said the new laws were an attack on civil freedom.

“State bodies will have more opportunities for corrupt relations with the public, interfering with the private lives of citizens and restricting their civil rights,” he said.

These kinds of rigid laws, he continued, could weaken both society at large and Tajikistan’s unique national culture.

If the state really wanted to alleviate the pressures of daily life, Hakimov continued, “it would be expedient for the country’s political leadership to implement alternative measures to improve the efficiency of the national economy, as well as improve citizens’ quality of life”.

Tajikistan is suffering through a financial crisis, its economy hard hit by falling remittances from migrant workers in Russia.

Saifullo Safarov, the deputy director of the state-run Centre for Strategic Studies, argued that there was a social need for the law, which would ease the burden on ordinary people who felt pressured to host expensive events for huge numbers of people.

“These amendments were not proposed by scientists or officials. The society, the public came up with them,” he said, explaining that many ideas for new legislation came from ideas submitted through television and radio programmes.

“Legislators simply formalised their proposals and gave them a legal appearance and position,” he said.

He acknowledged that the amendments had not been universally popular.

“One cannot force everyone to think alike. The amendments are aimed to combat large expenditures and the cultural leftovers of the past that prevent people from living freely. They are not an attack on national traditions and they are not against Islam. On the contrary, these amendments are based on both the requirements of Islam and of a secular state.”

“The law was changed to help people and it will bring them relief, ” agreed Saidmukarram Abdulkodirzoda, the chairman of the Ulema council of the Islamic Centre of Tajikistan. While nominally independent, this body tends to represent the state-sanctioned form of Islam.

Political scientist Khursand Khurramov said that it was possible the state was fulfilling its responsibilities to the public through such legislation.

“The logic of the authorities behind the policy is clear; it’s not about abolishing religious values but instead it’s an attempt to raise the standard of living of citizens by minimizing their expenses,” he said, adding, “This decision is very targeted, because one of the classical functions of the state is to improve the welfare of its citizens by increasing their incomes.”

However, he warned that the authorities faced a struggle implementing the laws.

“In traditional societies - with Tajik society being a clear example - it is extremely difficult to abolish traditions that are part of the mentality, lifestyle and outlook of the people.”

Journalist Nurali Davlat was also pragmatic in his views of the amendments.

“It can be seen as another attempt of the now-former communists to enforce [their control] over the remnants of the past,” he said, adding that it symbolised the crisis of ideas between tradition and modernity.

More practically, he continued, “it’s an attempt to strengthen the country’s budget by introducing fines at a time when the economy struggles through a crisis”.

Location: [Tajikistan](#)

Topic: [Law reform](#)

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