

Uzbek Mini-skirt War

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An attempt by the Uzbek authorities to promote traditional dress has provoked controversy

Clothing has become the latest flash point in Uzbekistan's uneasy relationship with Islam.

A row broke a month ago when Deputy Prime Minister Dilbar Gulyamova proclaimed that girls shouldn't wear mini-skirts, slit skirts, tight trousers and other "attention-grabbing" items. She also insisted they dispense with the hijab, or Muslim veil.

Since the IMU set off a series of bomb explosions in Tashkent last year, girls wearing hijab - usually from families sympathetic to the Islamists, whether militant or not - have been banned from classes.

Girls wearing 'immodest' clothing are also being banned from certain institutions.

At Tashkent University's journalism faculty, a girl was barred from classes for wearing a mini-skirt. At the faculty of education, women can't wear trousers.

So what is a respectable Uzbek girl to wear? Local papers have been debating the issue for weeks.

Gulyamova advocates traditional Uzbek costume - a long dress, low-heeled shoes and traditional Muslim cap. Girls who dress like this, she said, know their value, and "do not leave themselves at the mercy of a gaze from a passing man."

"Loose clothing, like skirts above the knee, can provoke men," she continued. "Is that what a girl needs? She can show off her beauty in modest clothing too."

Gulyamova is equally concerned with the fashion for the hijab, which covers the face and body, "If they're so modest, they should wear traditional Uzbek clothing."

The banning of the Muslim veil last year was widely welcomed by many traditional Uzbek men.

Meanwhile, young people are furious over the anti-modern dress movement.

"We want to be the same as youngsters around the world," fumes Gulsunai Navruzova, a student from Djizak. "Wanting clothes to be comfortable and laid back is natural."

She said reprimanding people for wearing shorts is ridiculous, "In the heat we have here, when you want to wear a minimum of clothing, they're very convenient."

The local newspaper Pravda Vostoka, however, is not impressed with the sartorial standards of the young.

"It's indecent to wear a mini-skirt to school," it proclaimed. "You can wear a grass skirt in Africa, but we Uzbeks have long since grown out of that. We are sensible people."

The clothes campaign is just the latest sign that women's rights here are being infringed, says Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva of the Uzbek Women's Resource Centre.

"In 1995, Uzbekistan signed the UN Convention on the removal of all forms of discrimination against women," said Tokhtakhodjaeva. "With its decrees on what can and cannot be worn, it is blatantly contravening the document it signed."

Some people back up their campaign against modern dress by quoting the Koran.

"But if we are to measure our lives against sharia (Islamic law)," pointed out Tokhtakhodjaeva, "why are we fighting the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which wants a state based on sharia?"

Uzbekistan has declared that it will build a democratic state. But some women are concerned it will turn into a democratic state for men alone.

Given that most of Central Asia look on the Taleban's radicalism as a worrying threat to regional stability, this would hardly be an ideal state of affairs.

The mini-skirt war has revealed that attitudes to women here remain traditional and even Islamic. All of which is alarming to women who thought they lived in a modern, secular society, as Uzbekistan is supposed to be.

Today dress restrictions, and tomorrow what? The legalisation of polygamy? The denial of women's right to decide for themselves?

Uzbek leaders and the press want to push women back to the beginning of the last century. Then some tore off their parandja - a cloth covering face - and burnt them, in the hope that women would never have to wear them again. It may have been a forlorn hope.

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