

## **Uzbekistan: No Veil of Silence**

**Author:** [IWPR staff](#)

Devout Muslim women join human rights group to defend their beleaguered position.

A human rights group in southern Uzbekistan has found itself with an unexpected source of fresh recruits – devout Muslim women who fear harassment and arrest by the security services.

When the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, HRSU, formally opened a branch office to cover the city of Karshi in the south of the country on August 20, most of its members were women who choose to wear the hijab – the headscarf and clothing which denote the wearer's religious convictions.

Even though this is an overwhelmingly Muslim society, any sign of religious belief that looks excessively fervent is frowned on by the authorities, who have arrested and jailed thousands of suspected members of banned Muslim groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir in recent years. In this atmosphere, women wearing Iranian- or Middle Eastern-style head-covering and clothing rather than modern clothes or traditional Uzbek dress are taking a risk, as are men who grow long beards.

The pressure increased after four days of violence in late March and early April, mainly in the capital Tashkent, which left 47 dead. The authorities have identified Hizb-ut-Tahrir and unspecified foreign Islamic groups as the culprits for these attacks, as well as for three suicide bombings at the end of July in which the United States and Israeli embassies were targeted.

Yadgar Turlibekov, who chairs the Kashkadarya provincial branch of HRSU of which Karshi is part, dates the surge in membership applications from the earlier spring attacks and the ensuing arrests of Islamic activists.

“New arrests of Muslims followed those events. The wave of arrests of believers forced them to come to our Kashkadarya office,” said Turlibekov. “This has been prompted by unjustified arrests and interrogations.”

Many of the women found that their husbands, sons or other relatives were caught up in the arrests. “Now there are not many men left among the Muslim believers, so it is left to us women to defend those who are still free,” said aspiring human rights activist Mehriniso Hamdamova, whose brother was detained and allegedly tortured by police two years ago.

According to Tolib Yakubov, who heads HRSU nationally, at least 1,000 people were detained and interrogated in Kashkadarya region alone after the spring attacks. “The authorities suspected them of involvement in the explosions just because of their religious beliefs and wearing hijab,” he said.

Four women in Karshi are reportedly facing charges of belonging to Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

So far Turlibekov has approved 25 out of more than 45 membership applications he has received from the women, saying not all of them are up to the work of collating evidence of human rights abuses.

Maqsuda Shoimardonova is one of the new recruits, joining HRSU in June 2004 after her husband Hasan Jumaev was arrested.

“When the law enforcement agencies started bothering me too, one of my female friends gave me some advice, explaining that HRSU stands up for human rights. I understood that I needed to be there,” said Shoimardonova. “At the very least, I intend at least to defend myself and the scarf on my head which law-enforcement agencies dislike so much.”

Turlibekov’s deputy, Nodir Ahadov, admits that the women are drawn to the human rights group out of a sense of self-preservation. “What attracts them most is how HRSU defends its members,” he said. “Many of them listen to foreign radio stations, and that has attracted them to human rights organisations. Nevertheless, it is all to the good. Believers now know who to talk to and how to defend themselves if there is any trouble.”

Among those planning to join the human rights group are the family of the preacher or imam at Karshi’s central mosque, Rustam Kilichev. The cleric was arrested on April 4, immediately following the violence in Tashkent, during a police sweep which saw at least 40 people detained in Karshi alone.

“He was detained right in the mosque. They planted drugs in his pockets,” said Kilichev’s wife Khulkar Rahimova, adding that the Hizb-ut-Tahrir leaflets plus 1,000 US dollars the police say they found at their house was in fact planted.

Kilichev’s mother Buston Boltaeva said that her son had in fact opposed the outlawed group he now stands accused of being part of. “In everything he did, my son struggled against Hizb-ut-Tahrir – yet in the end he is accused of belonging to the organisation.”

Like other devout Muslims, Boltaeva believes Uzbekistan’s justice system is gravely flawed. Many have stories of unfair harassment, arrest and court verdicts, and allege that torture is widespread in pre-trial detention and in prison camps – a charge that fits the pattern of allegations consistently made by international human rights organisations.

“Judicial power is practically non-existent here,” said Shoimardonova. “Our judges don’t understand the meaning of justice, and [simply] carry out the instructions of the executive branch.”

Murodulla Normurodov, the Kashkadarya representative of Uzbekistan’s official ombudsman for human rights, said he had not been approached by any women whose relatives had been arrested for Islamic activism. He suggested that those who raised concerns about the judicial process were likely to be relatives of people involved in militancy, and implied that suspects in ongoing cases were automatically guilty.

“We don’t have any information about these women. They don’t contact us,” said Normuradov. “I will not help them if their close relatives were engaged in covert religious activities or have chosen the path of terror. Maybe they are members of al-Qaeda and have undergone training at camps in Pakistan – whoever the relatives of such people are, they will not be given assistance by the ombudsman.”

At 17, Sarvinoz Berdieva is one of the younger Muslims to apply for HRSU membership.

“A week after the terrorist acts in Tashkent, police began threatening our family,” she said. “An investigator from Karshi city police department called us in there and yelled at us using obscene language. He forced us to write a statement saying we had no links with terrorist organisations.”

In August, Berdieva was summoned by the same police officer, but because she had attended HRSU meetings she felt empowered to disobey the order.

“I now know that the law-enforcement agencies have no right to call me in without justification. So I didn’t go.”

**Location:** Central Asia  
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