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TAJIKISTAN: "My police shave me"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service

Tajikistan is forcibly shaving many bearded Muslim men throughout the country, local people have told Forum 18 News Service. Independent legal expert Faredun Hodizoda noted that "aren't such actions and bans something that those interested in promoting jihad will use to provoke a reaction?" Deputy Interior Minister Ikrom Umarzoda refused to state who ordered the beard-shaving campaign, which comes soon after President Rahmon banned women wearing the hijab. Officials have contradicted themselves on whether police will be held responsible. One victim of the beard-shaving, human rights defender and blogger Rustom Gulov, publicly complained to the President and other senior officials about the campaign's lack of legal basis and the need to punish perpetrators. Gulov stated that the official response "will be an indicator of the value of human dignity in Tajikistan". The only formal response has been for him to be questioned about an allegedly "negative comment insulting President Rahmon" left on his blog. Officials demanded this be removed, which has been done. Officials have also imposed more restrictions on the haj pilgrimage, banning under-35s from participating.

In March and April Tajikistan's police started forcibly shaving numerous bearded Muslim men throughout the country, including on the streets of the capital Dushanbe and the northern city of Khujand, local people have told Forum 18 News Service. Police also told those they forcibly shaved that they must not wear beards.

Faredun Hodizoda, an independent legal expert in Dushanbe, told Forum 18 that he knows of many men in the capital and many other places across the country being stopped by police and then having their beards forcibly shaved off. "Just the other day a taxi driver complained to me of this happening to his nephew, for example", he told Forum 18 on 29 April.

The campaign against men wearing beards comes soon after President Emomali Rahmon in early March banned women from wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). Women were even stopped at kindergartens to be told that they must not drop their children off while wearing a hijab. Officials categorically denied these incidents, as well as orders to imams to read state-produced sermons at Friday prayers before unfree parliamentary elections and moves to ban the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (see F18News 1 April 2015 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2053>).

A provocation to Muslims

"What the police officers did to Gulov [see below] and others is wrong", legal expert Hodizoda stated. "It is a violation of their freedom of religion or belief and other personal liberties." He compared the beard-shaving to Soviet times, "when we could not wear beards or long hair to work or universities."

The authorities may explain their actions by claiming that they are afraid of radical religious movements or possible jihad, he noted. "But aren't such actions and bans something that those interested in promoting jihad will use to provoke a reaction from the Muslims of Tajikistan?" he asked.

Who ordered anti-beard campaign?

Deputy Interior Minister Ikrom Umarzoda refused to tell Forum 18 on 5 May who ordered the beard-shaving campaign. He then claimed that the Ministry "did not ask the police to shave beards or to do anything about the beards". However, he continued, "we asked them to explain to people in public places about the national dress of Tajikistan".

Asked why police shaved off the men's beards if the Ministry did not order them to do so, and what exactly the police were told to explain, Umarzoda evaded Forum 18's questions on 5 May. He replied "we don't know why they did so" and claimed that "wearing a beard is not banned in Tajikistan". He then refused to speak further to Forum 18.

Officials of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18 on 29 April. SCRA Deputy Chair Solehjon Zavkiyev, who is in charge of work with mosques, put the phone down immediately Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered. Asked who Forum 18 could talk to about the cases, The secretary (who would not give her name) of new SCRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda claimed that Davlatzoda was busy. She referred Forum

18 instead to SCRA Deputy Chair Jumokhon Giyosov. However, his phones and those of other officials were not answered the same day.

Will police be disciplined?

Deputy Interior Minister Umarzoda played down the beard-shaving campaign, claiming on 29 April that "it is only two or three men whose beards were shaved". He also told Forum 18 then that "we are investigating these cases at the moment, and we will punish those who are responsible".

On 27 April Umarzoda claimed to Radio Free Europe's (RFE/RL) Tajik Service that two police officers from Sogd Region were disciplined for the beard-shaving, but denied this statement to Forum 18 on 28 April. The Deputy Interior Minister claimed that "the journalists overtook the events. I told them that we are investigating at the moment and we will punish the responsible officers if we find any fault". Umarzoda refused to state what if any punishments might be imposed.

Emin Jalilov, Head of Khujand Police in the capital of Sogd Region, on 28 April refused to discuss the beard-shavings with Forum 18. "Why don't you talk to the Interior Ministry about this?" he replied when Forum 18 asked about the cases. When Forum 18 asked whether any disciplinary measures were taken against the police officers concerned, Jalilov responded that "No measures were taken against any officers". He then refused to talk more to Forum 18.

Forced beard-shavings

Rustom Gulov, a Muslim blogger and human rights defender, was stopped in Khujand's Panjshانبethe Market on 2 April by three plain clothes police officers. They asked him his name and why he was wearing a beard. The Deputy Head of the Khujand Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Siyovush Saidov, a lower-ranking CID officer Khusrav (whose last name is not known) and a third police officer who also refused to show any identity took Gulov by police car to Khujand Police Station, Gulov told Forum 18 on 28 April.

As he was taken to the police car, "I managed to give my phone and personal items to a friend, and asked him if he could contact my lawyer."

Police then "forced me to sit in a chair and shaved off my beard". Human rights defender Gulov estimated that possibly about 200 men had also been shaved, judging by the quantity of hair on the room's floor. He noted that many men have not publicly complained about the beard-shaving "for fear of the authorities".

Officers did not tell him why they forcibly shaved his beard, Gulov said. But on the way to the Police Station, officers asked him questions such as to which Islamic movement he belonged and what he thinks of dying as a Muslim martyr. "I wear a beard as part of the Islamic tradition, and I do not belong to any movement," Gulov explained to Forum 18. "My beard was not even a long one."

Gulov demanded that the police explain to him the legal grounds on which they stopped him and shaved his beard. "I told them that I will complain to higher authorities, that I will tell the media, and I will defend my rights. But they laughed at me and said very crude swear words to me." After the police finished shaving his beard off, Gulov refused to leave the building until his lawyer arrived and documented what happened. Police "went on laughing at me and insulting me, and told me that we will not let him in even if your lawyer comes."

Dilshod Jurayev, Gulov's lawyer, was not allowed into the Police Station, and had to wait outside.

Immediately after Gulov left the Police Station, he reported the incident to the Interior Ministry's Khujand Division which investigates citizens' complaints. The Khujand Division summoned Gulov on 10 April, eight days after the incident, and he wrote a statement about the incident. "The officials were polite to me this time", he told Forum 18. "However when I asked them what will be done to the officers, they said that they will only be reprimanded."

Saidov of Khujand CID, who detained Gulov, put the phone down on 28 April when Forum 18 asked why he and his colleagues detained Gulov and others and shaved off their beards. Subsequent calls to Saidov's phone on 28 April went unanswered.

"An indicator of the value of human dignity in Tajikistan"

Alluding to the Soviet-era slogan "My police protect me", Gulov wrote an open letter entitled "My police shave me" on 2 April in his blog blogiston.tj. It was addressed to President Rahmon, Prosecutor General Yusuf Rahmonov and Interior Minister Ramazon Rakhimzoda. Gulov recounted his experiences, noting that the police violated: "the Constitution, particularly Article 26 which guarantees freedom of religion; Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which also guarantees freedom thought, conscience and religion; .. Article 9 of the International Covenant which prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; and Article 358, Part 1 of Tajikistan's Criminal Code which imposes responsibility for illegal detention."

Gulov concludes his letter by stating: "The results of the investigation of my complaints by the authorities will be an indicator of the value of human dignity in Tajikistan."

On 6 April, Dushanbe City CID invited Gulov to come to them for a "conversation". He asked if the talk could take place in Khujand as he lives in Khujand and is busy. Gulov said that "some time later Khujand CID officers summoned me".

The Khujand CID officers did not give their names at the meeting but told Gulov that there is a "negative comment insulting President Rahmon" on his blog. The officials told him that "because I did not report about the negative comment to the authorities, I could be considered as an accomplice in a crime". Gulov told them that he did not read all the comments on his blog and had not noticed that particular comment. He told the CID officers that "I will erase it immediately". The CID released Gulov after he wrote a statement about the comment.

On 30 April, four weeks after posting his open letter on his blog, Gulov had received no written response from any official.

Asked when the Ministry will give a written response to Gulov on his complaint, Deputy Interior Minister Umarzoda told Forum 18 that "I already met and spoke to him in person. I assured him that we will investigate his case, and punish the officers responsible." Gulov confirmed to Forum 18 that he met the Deputy Minister on 27 April in Dushanbe, at a three-day roundtable discussion on community policing supported by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). "The Deputy Minister asked me if the police officers or anyone from the police had apologised to me." Gulov told him "No".

The roundtable was also supported by the US State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The US Ambassador to Tajikistan, Susan Elliott, commented at the event that: "Building a strong relationship between police and the people they serve, and giving those people a voice in law enforcement matters creates a transparent environment which contributes to the goals of reform and can only benefit the country".

Haj ban for under-35s

On April 13, Tajikistan banned people under 35 from going on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, RFE/RL reported on 14 April. It is unclear what impact the ban will have on current applicants to go on the haj, and the state via the SCRA and Council of Ulems controls who is allowed to go on the pilgrimage (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553>).

The haj is an obligation at least once in their lifetime for Muslims who are not prevented from making the pilgrimage due to health or similar reasons. However, this did not stop the authorities from in 2009 imposing a ban on people younger than 16 and older than 80 could take part (see F18News 3 September 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1484>).

Human rights defender Gulov told Forum 18 on 6 May that "there are many older people in the official queue. But not to allow any younger people to go on the haj is, by any human rights standards, violation and discrimination."

The SCRA claims that the under-35s ban was due to renovation works at Mecca being carried out by the Saudi authorities causing a 20 per cent reduction in the quota. Abdualol Alizoda, who oversees the haj pilgrimage at the SCRA, did not answer his telephone on 6 May. An official at Saudi Arabia's Embassy in Dushanbe, who would not give his name, claimed to Forum 18 on 6 May that he would discuss this "in 20 minutes". But no phones at the Embassy have been answered since the 20 minutes have elapsed.

"Easy questions to answer" ?

Khayrullo Saidov, Secretary to Grand Mufti Saidmukarram Abdukodirzoda of the state-backed Council of Ulems, asked by Forum 18 when the ban will come into force and why the ban was imposed, replied on 6 May: "These are easy questions to answer, but you should call back after 2 pm when the Mufti will be back in the office."

Called back after 2 pm that day, Saidov claimed that "we are not competent to answer these questions". He then referred Forum 18 back to the SCRA.

SCRA officials (who refused to give their names) on 6 May refused to comment on the ban. One official who answered SCRA Chair Davlatzoda's phone, said the Chair is busy but Forum 18 "can talk to Deputy Chair Giyosov". Giyosov put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls to him went unanswered. (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>>.

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