



## Female Virtue, Religion and State Ideology in Tajikistan

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Since independence in 1991, Tajikistan's authorities have been trying to promote a unifying ideology that could inspire the whole nation. National unity is particularly challenging in this country that has been wounded by a five-year civil war (1992-1997). As religiosity has become more prevalent over the years, the authorities have tried to thwart the growth of Islam by promoting a conservative ideology devoid of Islamic content, resting on imagined national traditions, national purity and ancient wisdom. Interestingly, the female figure has become increasingly instrumental in the state's national discourse. Patronizing moral recommendations focus mainly on female clothing and virtue, which have come to embody national values. The role of women in the transmission of family and patriotic values is celebrated, yet discourses hide a difficult reality for Tajik women who are deeply affected by poverty, labor migration, and social and state pressure.

*The Central Eurasia – Religion in International Affairs (CERIA) initiative promotes a better understanding of religion in Central Eurasia. The CERIA Initiative is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation.*

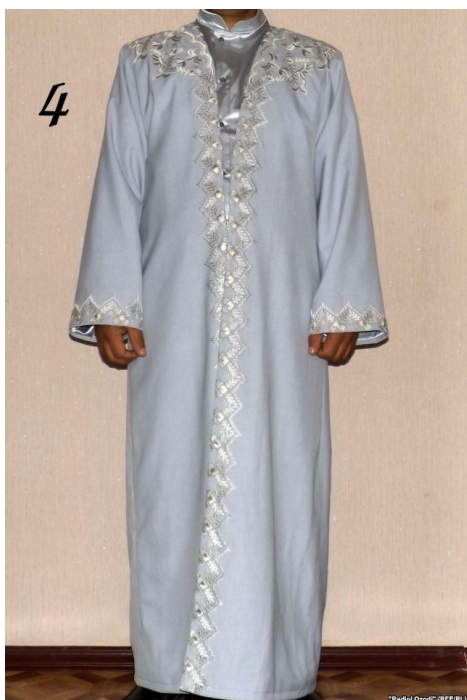
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## Channeling Tajik Islam

On the one hand, authorities have tried to instrumentalize religion for legitimacy purposes, though its use is carefully limited. Officially, the state is secular, but the special role of the Hanafi school of Islam is underlined in the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and religious Organizations*. The year 2009 was dedicated to the Great Imam (Imomi Azam) Abu Hanifa, the founder of Hanafism, which is the official religious teaching of Tajikistan.<sup>1</sup> An omnipresent figure in Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon regularly includes modest references to religion in his official addresses to the nation. Every year, presidential speeches congratulate citizens at the beginning and end of Ramadan and at the occasion of Idi Fitr and Idi Qurbon. In his Presidential inaugural speech in November 2006, Rakhmon underlined the importance of maintaining a secular state, yet swore an oath in the name of Allah and of the land. Even so, the Tajik president rarely refers to his own beliefs and does not appear to be very religious himself.<sup>2</sup> When Islam is evoked, it is presented as an integral part of Tajik culture and according to the President: “separating the Islamic faith from the national culture [...] is a mistake”.<sup>3</sup>

After some unsuccessful attempts to promote the Aryan and Zoroastrian heritage in the mid-2000s, the authorities are still looking for an inspiring secular ideology. In the spring 2015, at the occasion of his annual meeting with the country’s intelligentsia, the president summoned them to develop a secular ideology that takes into account “in priority, the principle of secularism, the development of national and secular thinking, respect for state



Example of an official outfit for Tajik imams.  
Source: RFE/RL.

language, history, and progressive tendencies of the national culture”.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, controversial legal measures meant to promote national values were adopted, such as the *Law on Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children*, introduced in 2011. It includes provisions on the transmission of “national values”. In particular, Article 8 invites parents or tutors to give children names that have “national consonance”<sup>5</sup> and holds parents responsible for raising children “in the spirit of the love and respect for the Motherland and national values”.

In May 2015, a bill that would forbid the registration of names considered too Arabic was being discussed but was not yet adopted. If so, registry offices would “not register names that are incorrect or alien to the local culture, including names denoting objects, flora and fauna, as well as names of Arabic origin”.<sup>6</sup> Other articles of the law are greatly interfering with parenting. For instance, parents should forbid children to carry cell phones to school, wear jewellery, and let children under twenty years old (the legal age is 18) go out at night in entertainment centres such as internet cafes and bars.

On the other hand, authorities have subordinated religion to the point that practices are now carefully regulated and the clergy under tight state control. Restrictions concern the prohibition of private unsanctioned religious lessons, of children's participation in religious ceremonies at the exception of funerals, and of women's access to mosques. In the meantime, religious education has become inaccessible as most madrassas (religious schools) are now closed, with the exception of the Islamic Institute in Dushanbe. Foreign Islamic education requires a special permission from the authorities, which have not hesitated to repatriate by force nearly 2,000 Tajik students from Islamic countries in 2010. Access to the annual *Hajj* has been limited to citizens over 35 years old. The Department of Religious Affairs has increased its influence on religious life by approving the nomination of imams, the erection of mosques by preparing a list of approved or suggested topics for Friday sermons, and by delivering permits for citizens who wish to organize private religious classes. Finally, as of 2014, imams have the obligation to wear state-made religious robes and receive their salary from the state.<sup>7</sup>

More significantly, authorities are trying to channel religious beliefs by establishing religious standards and making them compatible with national values. They promote an Islam defined as 'traditional' and 'legitimate', which refers to historical figures in opposition to an Islam presented as 'radical' and 'dangerous' tainted by foreign influences. The process of establishing a national Islam implies the discard of other trends deemed extremist or antagonistic to national values. Colonel Zikrullo Saidzoda of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, declared in August 2015 that Tajiks must stay away from foreign Islamic trends and that those who do not pray according to the principles of the Hanafi branch of Islam could be interrogated.<sup>8</sup>

A number of Islamic organizations have been added to the list of terrorist organizations and over the years, thousands of people have been prosecuted and condemned for their involvement in one of the banned organizations. In 2014 alone, Tajikistan's General Prosecutor opened 348 cases on charges of extremism and radicalism or for their support or promotion.<sup>9</sup> Some of the organizations are known for their violent actions while others such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir may hold fundamentalist views but are non-violent organizations. The last one added on the list is the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), due to its alleged involvement in an assault against a military compound near Dushanbe in September 2015. Dozens of IRPT members went into exile and another dozen are awaiting trial in Tajikistan. As one of the main stakeholders in the 1997 Peace Agreements, the main opposition force, and the standard bearer of moderate political Islam, the ban of the IRPT is of extreme significance.<sup>10</sup> Even though Tajik society is not on the verge of radicalization, the Islamic Revival Party's disappearance may jeopardize the stability of the country. Finally, the subordination of religion is accompanied by anti-religious propaganda that became especially virulent after 2010. What is denigrated is not Islam *per se* but the strict adherence to Islamic principles, especially religious education and clothing.

### **The reinvention of tradition**

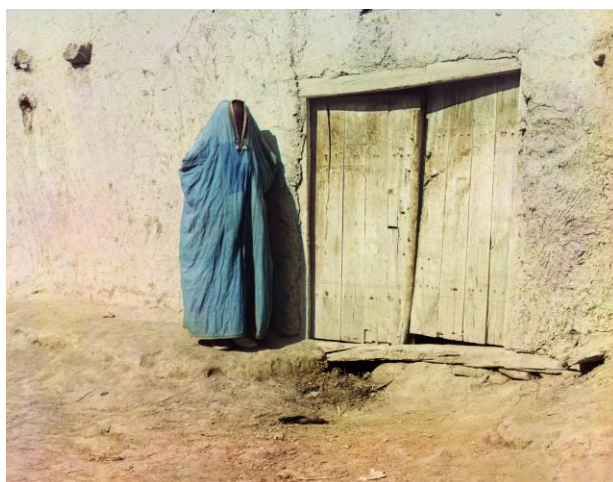
In the early years of the Bolshevik revolution, the liberation of women from centuries-old patriarchal oppression was a priority for the Soviet authorities. The promotion of women's rights had two objectives: to ensure the equality of rights for men and women, but perhaps

even more importantly, to undermine the Islamic clergy and religious traditions. The forced unveiling of women, called *Hujum*, literally, the ‘assault’, provoked serious backlashes but in the end, coercion and propaganda provided results and in the last days of the USSR, barely any Central Asian women, at the exception of elderly ones, were covering their heads. A very similar dynamic is at play in today’s Tajikistan.<sup>11</sup> Once again, the female apparel, and more broadly, the female figure, embody the secular and progressive character of the nation and is used to delegitimize strict religious practices. Yet, if women are accused of propagating extremist ideas if they wear a hijab, they are also criticized for dressing up in European ‘sexy’ clothes that betray national values. To a lesser extent, men’s appearance, especially the beard, also falls under state scrutiny. Such recurrent patronizing state discourses are used to define and impose a proper behavior in line with an idealized conception of a secular society. The issue of concordance between morality and national traditions not only tells us about Tajik politics, it also exemplifies the difficulties of nation-building in post-Soviet countries.

Though they are still a minority, the number of women who wear hijabs in Tajikistan is increasing year after year and this has become a matter of concern for the authorities. Several public figures have publicly criticized women’s clothing style, either ‘Islamic’ or ‘European’. In 2007, Abdudjabbor Rakhmonov, the Minister of Education (2005-2012), introduced a decree that forbids women to wear hijabs in educational institutions. The decree also compels young women to dress “in accordance with their status and national traditions”, and avoid clothes that are “provocative”, for instance tight jeans and miniskirts.<sup>12</sup> Attacks against the hijab reached a new level in the fall of 2010, when Rakhmonov publicly condemned parents who send their children to study with mullahs as well as women who wear the hijab, going as far as to call these women “monkeys”.<sup>13</sup> When he became Rector of the Pedagogical University in Dushanbe in 2012, Rakhmonov issued a decree instructing female future professors to wear high heels (maximum height of 3 cm) so that they look more professional and feel more confident.<sup>14</sup> Even the Council of Ulemas, Tajikistan’s quasi official clergy, recommended women to wear Islamic clothes that conform to the national culture, and not those of Iran, Turkey, and other Arabic countries.<sup>15</sup> In the spring 2015, it was reported that a number of prostitutes wear hijabs in order to avoid public or police harassment.<sup>16</sup> The story was picked up by the authorities, and used to delegitimize the veil once again. In August 2015, Mahmadsaid Ubaidulloev, Dushanbe’s Mayor, declared war against foreign clothing and even instructed relevant state bodies to put an end to the import and sale of foreign clothing in Dushanbe.<sup>17</sup>

In August 2015, even Colonel Zikrullo Saidzoda of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, felt compelled to criticize women for wearing “European-style clothes”, and suggested them to wear “traditional clothes”.<sup>18</sup> In May, the mayor of Khujand in northern Tajikistan announced the organization of a series of meetings with women to discuss ways to dress properly, in accordance to national traditions. He also underlined the need to conduct raids in clothing stores in order to prevent the selling of Afghan and Iranian clothes.<sup>19</sup> The President himself has associated the hijab to extremist ideas in a recent speech delivered at the occasion of Mother’s Day in 2015. The President condemned women who wore foreign clothing, saying that they were propagating extremist ideas in the country.

Although the President maintains that ethnographic studies prove how since ancient times, Tajik people always had beautiful female clothes and that women and girls never wore black clothes, the definition of what represents ‘tradition’ is problematic. What the authorities refer to as a ‘traditional or national clothes’ is a colorful outfit composed of baggy pants worn underneath a long loose dress with short or long sleeves. Yet, before the Bolshevik revolution, women living in the sedentary regions of Central Asia such as present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan used to wear burqa-like robes called *paranja* or *chavchan* that covered the whole body including the face until the Soviets launched the *Hujum* campaign in the late 1920s. Therefore, the ‘traditional clothes’ politicians refer to are in fact Soviet clothes. The use of pre-colonial legacies requires a distortion of history that authorities are willing to make so that it fits the nationalist secular programme they are promoting.



*Samarkand, 1910. Traditional/Pre-Soviet clothes?*

*Source: Sergei M. Prokudin-Gorskii Collection at the Library of Congress*



*Khujand 2011. Traditional/Soviet clothes?*

*Source: Photo credit H  l  ne Thibault*

In return, men’s clothes are never evoked. In Tajikistan, most men dress in regular shirts, pants, jackets and ties, which do not seem to betray national traditions despite their

'European' origin. Yet, over the years, there have been many reports concerning police harassment toward bearded men, and even reports of some being forced to shave their beard.<sup>20</sup> In 2009, the Council of Ulemas even established a norm for the length of beards, which should not exceed the length of a fist.<sup>21</sup>

Dressing-up has become a patriotic affair in Tajikistan. In addition to their appearance, women's virtue should also incarnate patriotic values and participate to state-building. In his speech at the occasion of Mother's Day in May 2015, Rahmon labelled mothers as guardians of the mother tongue and talked at length about the sanctity of women, and how maternal authority fosters the future builders of the state and society. In the authorities' point of view, women bear a lot of responsibilities, both domestic and public. However, they are exercised in less than ultimate conditions as the country's socio-economic situation remains highly problematic.

### **Women under pressure**

Labor migration in Central Asia is a phenomenon of extreme significance, especially for Tajikistan. According to the Russian Federal Migration Service, as of January 2015, there were 999,169 migrants from Tajikistan residing in Russia, including 182,262 women.<sup>22</sup> In 2014, 41% of the Tajik GDP came from the revenues of migrant workers, making Tajikistan one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world.<sup>23</sup> Labor migration introduces new social dynamics within Tajikistan. In the absence of men, women are compelled to play more important roles as they become the families' and sometimes communities' main pillars. Labor migration also has an impact on the structure of the family due to the increasing number of divorces. In Sunni Islam, men can divorce their wives by saying "Talaq" three times and many migrants end up divorcing over the phone while in Russia. In April 2011, the Council of Ulemas of Tajikistan announced its intention to issue a fatwa that would ban so-called SMS-divorces<sup>24</sup>. In 2013 alone, more than 1,700 women sought help from the Committee on Women and Family Affairs and the Council of Ulemas to resolve such litigations. Yet, in January 2014, the Council announced that it could not stop the phenomenon and concluded that it was not contrary to Sharia.<sup>25</sup> Alone with children, without money, and with few economic opportunities, women sometimes have no choice but to become a man's second or third wife. This might be one of the factors that encourage the rise of polygamy in Tajikistan, even if it is illegal.

The evolving structure of the Tajik family model is perhaps one of the reasons why the government designated 2015 the Year of the Family and planned on adopting a series of measures to support families. The President also announced that a new topic, "culture of family life," was in preparation and would be introduced in schools to prepare the youth to adult life. The government has also adopted a law that outlaws consanguineous marriages since it was reported that there are 26,430 disabled children in Tajikistan and 35% of these were born in consanguineous marriages.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas millions of Tajik men endure the burden of labor migration, Tajik women suffer pressure at multiple levels: state, social and economic. Poverty is widespread and touches around 47% of the population. Access to quality healthcare and education is limited and

affects the healthy development of communities. In winter time, citizens in rural areas have access to only three to four hours of electricity a day, which greatly reduces the quality of life. What is especially alarming is the rapid increase of suicide rates, especially among young women. The national suicide rate in Tajikistan among the youth (15-19 years old) increased 63% from 2.8 to 4.5 (per 100,000) between 2008 and 2010. Female suicide rates increased 176%, from 1.9 to 5.2 (per 100,000), while males experienced only a 6% increase, from 3.6 to 3.9. In 2011, more than 200 women committed suicide in the northern province of Sughd alone, which has a population of around 2.2 million. The reasons cited are poverty, lack of life perspectives and domestic violence.<sup>27</sup>

A survey conducted in 2012 reported that 25% of women in Sughd had suffered from violence perpetrated by their spouse while only 12% reported such cases in the central region called District under Republican Subordination.<sup>28</sup> The actual numbers might be higher since domestic violence is often perpetrated by in-laws. The government passed a Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence in 2013 that might encourage women to denounce abuses and change the widespread perception that domestic violence is somehow acceptable. Finally, another sign of distress is the exposure of a number of horrendous cases of infanticides since 2008, to a point where journalists are wondering if this is turning into a somber pattern.<sup>29</sup> These gloomy numbers reflect the social and economic distress that is prevalent in today's Tajikistan, which especially affects women.

## Conclusion

Rahmon's Mothers Day's speech in 2015 insisted on the importance of the mother described as a unique creature "who swings the cradle with one hand and with the other, the planet". Such paternalistic rhetoric conveys the message that women are responsible for the perpetuation of the nation through the appropriate upbringing of children as well as through the display of proper social behavior, such as the celebration of national values and the rejection of foreign influence. Overall, citizens are encouraged to act in conformity with national values and according to the President, "there is no greater sin than the betrayal of parents and of the Motherland".<sup>30</sup> Yet, the tightening of state control over not only politics and religion, but over ways of being in the world on a day-to-day basis increases the pressure on citizens, especially women. Eventually, such patronizing practices can only foster resentment toward a privileged and commanding political elite.

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<sup>1</sup> Avaz Yudalshev, "Hanafi School Recognized as Official Religion of Tajikistan", *Asia Plus*, March 5, 2009, accessed 25-11-2015, <http://www.news.tj/en/news/hanafi-school-recognized-official-religion-tajikistan>.

<sup>2</sup> A video in which Emomali Rahmon is seen looking drunk and singing at his son's wedding in 2007 surfaced on Youtube in June 2013. As a result, the authorities shut down the country's Youtube access for several days. Tohir Pallaev, "YouTube Blocked in Tajikistan After Video of President Dancing Goes Viral". *Global Voices*. May 27, 2013, accessed 25-11-2015, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/05/27/tajikistan-famous-wedding-singer-splits-opinion/>.

<sup>3</sup> Leonid Chigrin and Ato Hamdam, *Dnevnyaya zvezda Imomi Azama*, (Dushanbe: Irfon, 2009), 12.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.prezident.tj/ru/node/8463>

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