

Mufti Tells Women to Cover Up

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GROZNY — The spiritual leader of Chechnya called on women Wednesday to dress more "modestly" and only show their face and hands, in the latest attempt by authorities to install Islamic ideas.

A decade after Moscow drove separatists from power in the second of two wars, Chechnya rests on a shaky peace. Spiritual leaders are gaining influence and power in the region, leading analysts say Chechnya is evolving toward autonomy once again.

"Women must understand our request," mufti Sultan Mirzayev told Reuters in an interview in the Chechen capital, Grozny.

"We are not forcing anyone, but we are calling on women to wear traditional Islamic dress, where only the hands and face are visible," he said.

The mufti's words carry no legal weight but are generally followed because he is a respected spiritual leader and because of his ties to Chechnya's hard-line, Kremlin-backed leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

Kadyrov, who has repeatedly spoken out about his dislike for women who dress less appropriately than what he deems acceptable, ordered an edict in 2007 that banned women from going bareheaded in state buildings.

Though it was in direct violation of Russian law, it is still strictly observed four years later.

A spate of attacks last year on women for not wearing headscarves, which rights groups and assailants alike said were orchestrated by authorities, sparked outrage from Chechen women who said being forced to dress a certain way violated the Constitution.

Mirzayev said "short skirts, a naked head and loose hair" on women make men think they "only had half a brain" and would deter men from speaking to them. "This is our religion where there is nothing but modesty," he added.

Mirzayev also praised the Russian Orthodox Church for its proposal last month that women adhere to a "dress code" that involved more modest clothes, a move that sparked outrage from Russian feminists.

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