

Headscarf Debate Highlights Muslims' Grievances

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A ban on girls wearing the Islamic headscarf to a school in southern Russia has angered Muslims and forced President Vladimir Putin, who has robustly defended the Orthodox Church, to affirm that the country is secular.

Muslims in the town of Kara Tyube, in the Stavropol region, say the ban on the hijab at School No. 12 forces their children to choose between their religion and a state education.

“The principal phoned me personally and told me to come and take my children home because from now on they will not be allowed to attend lessons in Islamic dress,” said Ravil Kaibaliyev, whose daughter Marian was barred from her middle school because of the white headscarf she wore every day.

“To force her [to remove her headscarf] would violate her integrity. She would be torn in a conflict between her soul and the others around her, and I think that is wrong,” said Kaibaliyev, wearing a long beard and white prayer cap.

The school's principal, Marina Savchenko, said she had received threats over her decision but did not regret it.

"Here everything should be very simple: It is an [educational] institution, so it's a secular dress code, business-dress style. That's all. End of discussion," she said outside the school.

It is Marian Kaibaliyev's misfortune to live in an area of Russia not recognized as Muslim enough to justify special recognition for Islamic practices.

In Tatarstan, female students freely wear headscarves to school. In Muslim Chechnya, which borders Stavropol and was the site of two separatist wars, a headscarf that covers a student's hair is part of an accepted dress code.

But in regions where they are in a minority, many of Russia's 15 million to 20 million Muslims complain that their rights count for less than those of their Russian Orthodox counterparts.

Putin received strong backing from the Russian Orthodox Church in his election campaign this year.

But when he was asked last week about the situation at School No. 12 in a meeting with civic leaders, Putin came down squarely on the side of secularism.

"We should respect people's religious feelings, but we should always proceed from the fact that we live in a secular state," he said, suggesting that Muslim headscarves could violate the principle of separation of religion and state.

Muslims, however, having seen the Orthodox Church grow in strength and influence since the end of communism, are growing increasingly ready to assert their religious identity.

They point to the fact that Moscow has only five mosques despite a population of 2 million faithful, and they say that repeated applications to build more have been refused.

Abdullah Mukhametov, a Muslim political and religious analyst, said such grievances were often dismissed by authorities, who tended to try to fob Muslims off with token offerings, such as a ban on the crude anti-Islam video "Innocence of Muslims" posted online.

"We can talk about the need to protect the religious freedoms and sentiments of all Russians," he said. "But at the end of the day, there is a distinct feeling that some religions are simply more equal than others."

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