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Don't let them eat cake, Saudi cleric says

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia -- When Hala al-Masaad invited her girlfriends over to celebrate her 18th birthday with cake and juice, the high school student was stepping into an unusual public debate. Is celebrating birthdays un-Islamic?

Saudi Arabia's most senior Muslim cleric recently denounced birthday parties as an unwanted foreign influence, but another prominent cleric declared they were OK.

That has left al-Masaad with mixed feelings about her low-key celebration last month. She loves birthday parties because they make her feel she has "moved from one stage of life to another."

"But I sometimes feel I'm doing something haram," she said sheepishly, using the Arabic word for banned.

The Saudi ban on birthdays is in line with the strict interpretation of Islam followed by the conservative Wahhabi sect dominant in the kingdom. All Christian celebrations _ and even most Muslim feasts celebrated elsewhere in the Islamic world _ are prohibited as alien customs.

Only the Muslim feasts of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha, which concludes the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, are permitted.

The latest controversy started when a prominent cleric, Salman al-Audah, said on a popular satellite TV program last month that it is OK to mark birthdays and wedding anniversaries with parties as long as the Arabic word "eid" _ feast _ is not used to describe them.

That comment prompted a quick denunciation by Saudi Arabia's top religious authority, Sheik Abdul-Aziz Al Sheik, who said such celebrations have no place in Islam and gave a list of foreign customs he finds unacceptable.

"Christians have Mother's Day, an eid for trees, and an eid for every occasion," Al Sheik told the newspaper Al-Madina. "And on every birthday, candles are lit and food is given out."

There is no question the remarks by al-Audah contradicted religious edicts issued by senior Saudi clerics over the years.

One such ruling, by the previous grand mufti, Sheik Abdul-Aziz bin Baz, said Muslims should not emulate the West by celebrating birthdays _ even that of the Prophet Muhammed, which is marked in most other Middle Eastern countries as a holiday.

"It's not permissible to take part in them," he said.

Yet, despite the continuous edicts against such parties, it's not hard to find stores that cater to Saudis who celebrate birthdays, anniversaries or even Western holidays like Valentine's Day.

Customers can browse albums showing birthday wall decorations, table settings and cakes, and order party bags with coloring books, pens and school supplies.

One popular party game features a life-size papier-mache mannequin of a cartoon or storybook character, such as Cinderella _ much like pinatas at children's parties in the West. To get at the gift hidden inside, children take turns hitting it with a stick.

Buthaina Ba-Aqeel, 51, said she used to throw birthday parties at home for her children, but they were low-key and not on the same day the child was born _ to avoid singling out one particular day during the year to celebrate.

Even that would be too much for Riham Ahmed, a 20-year-old economics major. "It's enough to have two eids," she said. "My birthday is a normal day. Even my parents don't congratulate me."

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