

## Uzbekistan: Building on Centuries of Inter-Religious Harmony

The new leadership of Uzbekistan is openly tackling a backlog of challenges, including in the field of religious freedoms.



*By Javlon Vakhobov*

*Originally published by The Diplomat, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2018*

As a secular state with a Muslim majority, where different faiths live side-by-side, engaging one another in peace, tranquility, and respect, Uzbekistan prides itself on its centuries-long traditions of tolerance and inter-religious harmony.

Many have identified the country's ethnic diversity and religious harmony as a legacy of the Silk Road, which served as a melting pot of civilizations and cultures.

Throughout the centuries, the territory of today's Uzbekistan has been a home for well-known scholars and theologians like the 9th century Imam Bukhari and Imam Maturidi, and the 14th century Baha Uddin al-Naqshbandi who were critical to defining the humanistic essence of Islam, which calls for kindness, peace, and tolerance.

Uzbekistan is also a land with ancient roots of Christianity, as the Nestorian Church brought the faith to Central Asia from northern Iraq.

Saint Daniel's purported fifth century gravesite in Samarkand – which has long been a pilgrimage site for common worship among Muslims, Christians, and Jews – best symbolizes the spirit of religious accord in Uzbekistan.

Today, our country is confidently presenting an Uzbek model of a secular state in which the moderate and enlightened practices and teachings of Islam and many other religions and faiths are able to flourish. Uzbek's society of tolerance includes more than 140 nationalities, as well as 16 religious denominations – including Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Full Gospel, Adventist, and other Christian churches, as well as religious communities of Bukhara and European Jews, Baha'is, Krishnas, Buddhists, and others – over 2,200 resulting religious organizations.

In Uzbekistan people of all nationalities and confessions often celebrate the different holy days together, including Ramadan, Easter, Pesach, Purim, Hanukkah, and others. They also make pilgrimages to the holy places of their faith in Saudi Arabia, Russia, Greece, and Israel.

Social hostilities or disagreements involving religion are almost non-existent in Uzbekistan.

However, we admit that in the past there were restrictive policies in the field of religious affairs, policies that sought to prevent the spread of foreign-based religious extremism that could threaten the survival of Uzbekistan's secular state.

The new leadership of Uzbekistan is openly tackling a backlog of challenges, discussing them with people and decisively introducing measures, first in order to eliminate past practices, and second, to enhance the level of protection of civil rights, particularly freedom of religion.

The legal basis of state policy toward religion is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which guarantees that “all citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan have the equal rights and freedoms and are equal for the law without distinction as to sex, races, nationalities, language, religion, a social origin, beliefs, personal and social standing.” Also according to the constitution, the freedom of worship is guaranteed for all. Everyone has the right to practice any religion or not to profess any religion; compulsory propagation of religious views is prohibited.

The government's ambitious reform strategy program identifies five priority areas. According to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, “human interests come first.” This is the principle underlying the implementation of the strategy program, while “ensuring safety, interethnic concord and religious tolerance” are among the priorities as well.

Uzbekistan is rewriting the 20-year-old Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations to ensure religious freedom according to international standards.

A new consultative body – the Council of Faiths under the Religious Affairs Committee – was established, providing an effective platform for addressing urgent issues. The leaders of all 16 religious faiths, including Jehovah's Witnesses, are the members of the Council.

The government has introduced new regulations that simplify the procedure for state registration of religious organizations, reducing the fees for registration fivefold, easing the procedure of reporting, and adopting the practice of suspending a religious organization's activity only at its own discretion or by a court decision.

The rights of individuals and legal entities to produce, import, and distribute religious materials and textbooks on the territory of Uzbekistan are being secured.

The interdepartmental commission is currently working on consistent decriminalization of certain crimes that cause limited public danger as well as the further humanization of criminal legislation.

The December 2017 presidential decree “On pardoning for the 25th anniversary of adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan” is the first time in the history of our country when the head of state pardoned 2,700 convicts, including those imprisoned for crimes related to religious and extremist groups, and terrorist organizations. And over 16,000 individuals accused of participation in religious extremism activity were removed from government watch lists.

Uzbekistan’s current leaders recognize that forced methods of fighting the increase in terrorist threats throughout the world are not effective, and on the contrary in certain cases aggravate the situation. It is not enough to fight against the consequences of these threat, but rather the focus needs be on their causes.

Most of the crimes related to extremist activity and violence are committed by people under 30. And for many, ignorance and intolerance are a root cause.

To help address this, Uzbekistan supports the elaboration of the UN convention on youth rights – the unified international legal act to shape and implement youth policy under the conditions of globalization and ICT development.

Speaking to the UN General Assembly in September 2017, President Mirziyoyev initiated the adoption of UN Special Resolution “Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance” that provides universal access to education, eliminating illiteracy and ignorance – an approach that has been endorsed at a number of international forums since.

To advance President Miziyojev’s agenda, the, Imam Bukhari International Research Center in Samarkand and Center for Islamic Civilization in Tashkent have been established to conduct research aimed at studying the humanistic essence of Islam. The International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan was established by presidential decree in April 2018 and will provide the country’s religious educational institutions (universities and madrasas) with highly trained teachers and mentors, improve the research and professional skills of scholars, educate graduate students in the fields of Quran, tafseer, fiqh, science of hadith, and kalam, and will engage in research, teaching and public outreach.

Furthermore, the government has been increasingly responsive in fulfilling its international obligations and commitments.

In October 2017, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed visited Uzbekistan for the first time in 15 years. The Regional Representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Central Asia, Richard Comenda, and the international non-governmental organizations Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International also paid their first visits to Uzbekistan in many years.

Shaheed took note of Uzbekistan's efforts to promote religious literacy and freedom, and to advance best practices in the area. The special rapporteur recognized the scope of the ongoing and proposed reforms to address the challenges to full enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The visit of the UN High Commissioner has resulted in the adoption of the Action Plan on Cooperation with the High Commissioner Office, which includes 90 events directed at ensuring the protection of human rights and freedom of religion. The government of Uzbekistan also approved a set of measures to implement the Action Plan and has authorized more than 35 governmental and non-governmental agencies to take part in these events, and is committed to implementing these measures in a consistent manner that takes into account the recommendations provided and country's international obligations.

Uzbekistan is also working closely with its American partners to ensure the freedom of religion and belief. A high-level delegation from Uzbekistan attended the July 2018 Ministerial on advancing religious freedom, the first ever conducted by the U.S. Department of State. At the meeting Uzbekistan was singled out by U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo as an example of a country marching toward greater openness and a freer society, and he expressed hope that this positive development might spread region wide.

In September, we will hold another milestone event "Religious Tolerance: Uzbekistan and the U.S. experience" that will bring together Uzbek and U.S. government officials, experts, and civil society members in Tashkent to exchange of views on the prospects of interactions aimed to achieve the long overdue removal of Uzbekistan from the list of "countries of particular concern" on religious issues.

We consider this as recognition by our partners of the tremendous and landmark changes that are occurring in Uzbekistan on human rights, good governance and the rule of law and the government's full commitment to continue its efforts to further improve the environment of religious liberty in Uzbekistan.

It is our hope that this will contribute to the elimination of prejudices and negative stereotypes of our country and will allow Uzbekistan to be seen as offering a unique model of ensuring peace and prosperity in a multiethnic society.

*Javlon Vakhabov is Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the United States*