

Uzbekistan's experience in ensuring interfaith harmony as a key element in maintaining peace and stability



In the modern world, geopolitical tensions and bloc confrontation are increasing and often escalate into value and ideological conflicts. Inter-confessional harmony is being undermined and social polarization is increasing. As a result of political and economic instability and distorted perceptions of other cultures and faiths, religious violence is escalating in some parts of the world.

At the same time, analysts argue that the main reason for the problem of growing religiously motivated violence in the world is lack of understanding and respect between people of different faiths, as well as lack of knowledge about beliefs, stereotyping and biased thinking. In an era of misinformation, when inaccurate information is spread at an incredible speed, this only exacerbates the situation, creating favorable conditions for increasing interfaith mistrust and deepening social and political divisions.

Another reason for the increase in religious violence may be ineffective religious freedom policies. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, N. Ganea, "in many states, people and communities are deprived of fundamental rights to their identity in the field of religion or belief from the moment of birth".

In the context of such instability, maintaining an open and constructive dialogue between different religious and cultural groups becomes a vital resource for maintaining peace and stability. Open and free discussion of interfaith and interethnic disagreements, the search for common paths to cooperation, minimizes the likelihood of confrontation. Only the joint work of representatives of different religions and cultures is the key towards peaceful coexistence in a multicultural world.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations in 2019 decided to designate 22 August as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief which raises global awareness

of religious intolerance, violence and belief-based discrimination.

Experts believe that to ensure interfaith harmony and eradicate religious intolerance, it is necessary to establish dialogue between different faiths, as well as encourage mutual understanding and respect. At the same time, sharing knowledge about each other's beliefs and launching common programs aimed at solving public problems can be important factors in strengthening interfaith harmony.

In this context, it is important to note the experience of Uzbekistan, which is home to representatives of more than 130 nations and 16 confessions, in ensuring inter-confessional harmony in society is considered to be one of the most recognized in the world. It should be emphasized that numerous peoples of different religions have peacefully coexisted in our country for centuries. Our ancestors have always respected representatives of other faiths and worked side by side with them for the good of the country. It is noteworthy that in the history of our state there are no cases describing confrontations and conflicts on religious grounds.

Maintaining the tradition of friendliness and tolerance, Uzbekistan has implemented a number of reforms in this direction in recent years.

Firstly, it is notable that from the first years of independence, it was the state that assumed responsibility for ensuring inter-confessional harmony and maintaining a balance of interests in society. At the same time, today in the country the issues of ensuring effective religious policy have been brought to a new level.

In particular, since 2016, thanks to the political will of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, there has been a fundamental shift in the very essence of the policy in the field of religion and critically analyzed the experience of past years. In the course of the transformation, special emphasis has been placed on education, ensuring religious freedoms, expanding the rights of believers and a new approach to combating extremism.

As a result, the emphasis is currently placed not on forceful methods of solving problems, but on eliminating the causes that determine the spread of extremism and terrorism, as well as on preventive measures.

An important step was the significant strengthening of the legislative basis of state policy in the religious sphere and ensuring freedom of religion. In 2021, the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" was adopted in a new edition, during the preparation of which international norms and requirements in this area were carefully studied and taken into account. The law clearly regulates the rights and obligations of citizens, and it also strengthens legal guarantees for ensuring freedom of conscience and religion.

In particular, the registration procedure has been simplified and termination of the activities of religious organizations, and the ban on appearing in public places in religious attire was lifted and etc.

At the same time, the updated version of the Constitution, adopted in 2023, enshrined the principles of secularism and the prohibition of the imposition of any religion. At the same time, the Basic Law laid the foundations of a secular state as the most optimal model for maintaining harmony in society.

Secondly, although more than 95% of the population in Uzbekistan is Muslim, special attention is paid to religious minorities and their integration into society. Equal conditions have been created to satisfy the spiritual needs of representatives of all faiths. Thus, over the past 5 years, more than 100 religious organizations have been registered in the country, of which 20 are non-Islamic. Representatives of various faiths are given ample opportunities to make pilgrimages to holy places: Christians to Russia, Greece and Israel, Jews to Israel. They are provided with comprehensive assistance, medical services, fast and unhindered processing of visa documents, etc.

Thirdly, a feedback mechanism has been established in order to maintain interfaith dialogue in society. The state actively coordinates the establishment of mutual respect between citizens professing different religions and between religious organizations. For these purposes, there is a special state body – the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Under the Committee, a Council for Religious Affairs was created, which is a public advisory body, the composition of which in 2018 was expanded from 9 to 17, which included representatives of all religious denominations operating in Uzbekistan. The main tasks of the Council are to ensure tolerant interaction between religious organizations, assist them in carrying out their activities, and jointly develop proposals and measures to ensure interreligious cooperation.

Fourthly, special attention is paid to Islamic education and science, as well as the study and dissemination of humanistic and peace-loving principles, ideas of tolerance of the religion of Islam. In recent years, the centers of Imam Bukhari, Imam Termizi, Imam Matrudi, as well as the Center for Islamic Civilization have been created in the country. The main task of these scientific institutions is an in-depth study of the rich and multifaceted heritage of the great ancestors of the Uzbek people, who made a tremendous contribution to the development of Islamic culture and human civilization.

Fifthly, Uzbekistan has significantly intensified international cooperation in the field of ensuring interreligious harmony and religious tolerance. Thus, the special resolution “Enlightenment and religious tolerance” proposed by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly was unanimously approved by all UN member countries.

The document emphasizes the importance of establishing tolerance and mutual respect, ensuring freedom of religion, protecting the rights of believers and preventing discrimination against them.

Experts and religious figures visits are organized on a regular basis in Uzbekistan, within the framework of which international conferences and round tables are held to strengthen interfaith dialogue. In particular, in May 2022, the international forum “Dialogue of Declarations” was held in Bukhara, where about 40 prominent theologians, religious scholars, jurists and government officials from 10 countries, including the USA, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates, Austria, Pakistan, Ghana, Nigeria and others took part.

The “Bukhara Declaration”, adopted at the end of the forum, was recognized as an official document of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly. This declaration, promoting the idea of the peace-loving essence of religions, became a logical continuation and addition to the declarations previously adopted in Marrakech (2016), Jakarta (2017), Potomac (2018), Punto del Este (2018), Mecca (2019), as well as the important contribution of Uzbekistan to the establishment of the ideas of religious tolerance and interethnic harmony on a global scale.

This document confirms the importance of the religious factor in the life of modern society and calls on representatives of all religions to promote the development of a culture of tolerance and respect for human dignity.

At the same time, work in this direction continues actively. Thus, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, speaking at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in 2023, emphasized that: “Instances of religious intolerance and Islamophobia, which have recently been observed in some countries, cannot be allowed” and in order to promote ideas in the world interreligious tolerance and harmony proposed to create an International Center for Interreligious Dialogue and Tolerance in Uzbekistan under the auspices of UNESCO, as well as to hold an international conference in 2024 on the topic “Islam – a religion of peace and goodness.”

The implementation of these initiatives will create a platform for disseminating the unique experience and established traditions of religious tolerance of our country at the regional and international level, strengthen expert dialogue and exchange of views on ensuring interfaith harmony between countries.

In general, the experience of Uzbekistan in the field of ensuring interfaith harmony and religious tolerance can, without exaggeration, be studied as an effective example. The way of life of the Uzbek people, which has been formed over the centuries, continues to serve as a solid basis for establishing dialogue between peoples and interfaith tolerance in ensuring the stability of society and the development of the state.

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