

A New Era of Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan's Religious Reforms under President Mirziyoyev

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Abstract: Over the past eight years, Uzbekistan has implemented gradual reforms in its religious policies, focusing on promoting a more moderate interpretation of Islam and revitalizing religious practices. This article explores the key changes in religious life under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, emphasizing legal reforms, the expansion of religious education, and the government's evolving approach to Islam. The paper also examines the broader implications of these changes, including their impact on Uzbek society, interfaith relations, and the state's efforts to balance religious freedom with the prevention of extremism.

Keywords: Islam, religious freedom, reforms, government policy, interfaith dialogue, initiative, national identity, radicalism.

Uzbekistan's religious policies have been profoundly influenced by its history, particularly its time as part of the Soviet Union. During Soviet rule, all religious practices were heavily restricted, with the government promoting state atheism. Like the rest of Central Asia, Uzbekistan underwent aggressive secularization policies. Religion was viewed as a source of potential dissent and a challenge to communist ideology, and the Soviet state sought to suppress religious expression across its territories. Islamic institutions were strictly regulated, and religious leaders were often co-opted by the state or persecuted. The Soviet regime also sought to undermine traditional religious education, replacing it with state-sponsored atheism and promoting secular schools. The hajj pilgrimage, for example, was heavily restricted, and many religious practices were rendered illegal or severely limited. This legacy of secularism left a deep imprint on the political and cultural landscape of the country. In 1990, only 130 people were allowed to perform the hajj, and there were just 30 mosques operating in Uzbekistan[1].

In this environment, religious identity was suppressed, and many Uzbeks practiced Islam in secrecy or according to the constraints imposed by the state. The Soviet legacy left deep marks on the religious culture of Uzbekistan, contributing to a climate of cautious religious observance that persisted even after independence. While the political landscape in Uzbekistan shifted in the early 1990s, the nation continued to grapple with the complexities of religious revival within a state that remained suspicious of Islam's role in public life.

Following Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, President Islam Karimov continued many of the Soviet-era policies, albeit with slight modifications to reflect the new reality of an independent nation. Uzbekistan initially adopted a policy of cautious engagement with religion, seeking to maintain control over religious groups to prevent the rise of religious extremism. Under President Islam Karimov, the government was wary of Islamist movements and their potential threat to the state's secular order[2].

However, under President Karimov while maintaining strict control over religious practices, Uzbekistan gradually made minor changes toward religious practices. By 2016, the number of

mosques had reached approximately 2,000, and the number of citizens performing the hajj pilgrimage had risen to around 5,000.

Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in 2016, Uzbekistan has witnessed a gradual relaxation of restrictions on religious practices, signaling a shift toward a more inclusive form of Islam that does not challenge the secular political system. This shift reflects the government's attempt to utilize Islam as an instrument for fostering national unity. Upon assuming office, President Mirziyoyev initiated a series of reforms aimed at fostering greater religious freedom and tolerance. This change was driven, in part, by a desire to modernize the country's international image and to address the increasing demand for religious expression among Uzbekistan's predominantly Muslim population. While preserving the state's secular framework, Mirziyoyev's administration has gradually expanded space for religious expression and has actively sought to revitalize the country's Islamic heritage.

The Mirziyoyev government has taken several steps to normalize religion in public life. The Karimov government had imposed strict limitations on Islamic education and there were only 10 operating religious schools (madrasas), including the Tashkent Islamic Institute, which was established in 1971. In contrast, Mirziyoyev has expanded religious education.

One of the most notable aspects of Mirziyoyev's religious policy has been his calls for a more tolerant and inclusive approach to Islam. For instance, during the 2016 Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit held in Tashkent, President Mirziyoyev initiated the establishment of the Imam Bukhari Research Center in Samarkand, symbolizing Uzbekistan's growing engagement with global Islamic scholarship.

During his election campaign in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated: *"It would remain our main objective to ensure equal rights for all citizens, irrespective of their faith."* He also pledged to combat *"destructive forces that misinterpret Islam"* [1].

President Mirziyoyev repeatedly spoke about the necessity of promoting Islam as a peaceful and tolerant faith, free from the distortions of radicalism and extremism. These public statements were followed by concrete steps to implement religious reforms, such as the increased availability of religious education, greater access to religious pilgrimage, and the reopening of religious institutions previously closed.

President Mirziyoyev further stressed the importance of Islam's humanistic values in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations: *"We cherish our sacred religion as the focus of time-honored values. We strongly condemn and will never reconcile with those who rank our great faith together with violence and bloodshed. Islam calls us to kindness and peace, the preservation of a genuine human beginning"*[3].

During the holy month of Ramadan in 2017, President Mirziyoyev, for the first time in Uzbekistan's history, met with representatives of Islamic scholarship. In his speech, the Uzbek president proposed the establishment of new educational and research institutions. The proposed institutions included the Imam Termizi Islamic School (madrasa), Mir Arab Higher Madrasa (Institute), Imam Termizi Research Center, Imam Bukhari Hadith School, Imam Maturidi International Research Center, Marginani Fiqh School, Naqshbandi Sufism School, Abu Muin Nasafi Aqidah School, and the Center of Islamic Civilization. The president highlighted the crucial role of Islam and the influence of scholars in the spiritual progress of young people. He also proposed to introduce tax preferences for Islamic publications such as *Hidoyat* (Guidance) and *Islom nuri* (Light of Islam) and reiterated his support for Islamic TV programs *Hidoyat sari* (Towards The Guidance) and *Ziyo* (Light)[1].

Additionally, during his first term, the Mirziyoyev government oversaw the opening of 30 new mosques and the restoration of more than 100 mosques. By establishing the "Vaqf" Foundation, for the first time in a century, Uzbekistan reintroduced the waqf system — an institution historically significant in Islamic governance, which allows for the allocation of religious endowments for public benefit. This move not only restored a key component of Uzbekistan's Islamic legacy but also symbolized a broader effort to re-establish the country's Islamic roots. The government made efforts to

further develop religious studies by opening doctoral programs in Islamic studies at the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan [4].

President Mirziyoyev has increasingly sought to position Islam as a source of national identity and cultural pride. This has been part of a broader effort to use religion as a unifying force in the country, while promoting Uzbekistan's rich Islamic heritage. Under Mirziyoyev, Islam has become more visible in the public sphere. Islamic holidays such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are now more widely celebrated, and children are allowed to participate in prayers, a significant departure from the Karimov era.

In line with these changes, the government reformed the legal framework governing religious freedom. The revised Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, enacted in 2021, facilitated the registration of religious organizations by lowering the required number of members for registration from 100 to just 50. It also shortened the approval process for registration applications from three months to one month. Moreover, the new law lifted the ban on wearing religious attire in public spaces[5].

These changes suggest that the Mirziyoyev administration recognizes the importance of Islam to the identity of the Uzbek people. While Islam is central to the cultural and spiritual identity of Uzbekistan, the government has drawn a clear distinction between “cultural Islam” — which pertains to the faith's role in national identity — and “political Islam”, which involves the use of religion for political purposes. Political Islam, in this context, refers to any movement that seeks to integrate Islam directly into the political sphere, often challenging the secular state. Uzbekistan's government remains cautious about allowing such movements to gain influence, having experienced the threat of radical Islamist groups in the past. The newly adopted constitution of Uzbekistan reaffirms the country as “*a sovereign democratic, legal, social, and secular state.*”

In 2023, following a constitutional referendum, President Mirziyoyev reinforced the country's secular identity, stating: “*Uzbekistan is a secular state. It will remain so. This is the will of our people, their firm choice, expressed in a referendum. We will continue to ensure the freedom of conscience of every citizen, regardless of his nationality, language, religion, and social status, and create the necessary conditions for the free activity of religious denominations. We will consistently continue the policy of ensuring harmony and mutual respect among the representatives of different nations and faiths in the country. We will never allow any manifestations of radicalism in our society or the use of religion for political purposes*”[6].

Uzbekistan's efforts to counter extremism have also shaped its policies toward Islam. While radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and ISIS have historically posed a threat to the state's stability, the Mirziyoyev government has pursued a strategy of de-radicalization alongside strict security measures.

In his address to imams and religious figures, President Mirziyoyev urged religious leaders to be active in promoting Islamic values in maintaining peace within Uzbekistan. The government has focused on de-radicalizing individuals involved in extremist movements through vocational training, psychological counseling, and religious education aimed at promoting a moderate interpretation of Islam.

Mirziyoyev's administration has sought to promote a more moderate form of Islam, one that aligns with Uzbekistan's national identity and its secular political framework. The government has also worked to rehabilitate former extremists, providing them with educational opportunities and reintegrating them into society.

The government has also worked closely with other Central Asian states and international partners to curb the spread of extremism in the region, including cooperation on intelligence-sharing and border control to prevent the infiltration of extremist ideologies from neighboring Afghanistan. In his speeches at summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Organization of Turkic States, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), as well as during his visits to neighboring

countries, President Mirziyoyev has repeatedly stressed the importance of regional collaboration against extremism[3].

The Mirziyoyev government seeks to curb extremism while promoting Islam as a unifying force for national cohesion and social stability. In order to mitigate risks such as radicalization and extremism, the Uzbek president has proposed promoting religious education, involving youth in education, innovation, and sports, addressing economic inequality and youth unemployment, and promoting cultural heritage and moderate Islamic values.

Mirziyoyev's religious policy can be characterized by several key aspects:

Islam as a National Identity Symbol: The government increasingly uses Islam to reinforce national identity, highlighting Uzbekistan's rich Islamic heritage as a source of cultural pride and unity. Emphasizing Islamic heritage in tourism has also led to an increase in visitors.

Relaxation of Religious Restrictions: The government has allowed for greater religious freedom, including religious practice, religious education, and the celebration of Islamic holidays. The government authorized a substantial increase in the number of hajj pilgrims, reaching around 15,000 [7].

Countering Radical Islam: To prevent the rise of radical Islamist movements, the government has strengthened security measures and promoted a moderate interpretation of Islam. Research centers have been established to promote this interpretation, local Islamic scholars have been mobilized for counter-radicalization efforts, and regional cooperation has been emphasized.

Fostering Religious Tolerance: The government has taken steps to improve interfaith dialogue and promote religious tolerance, particularly in a country that is home to both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2023, President Mirziyoyev proposed organizing an International Conference on **"Islam: A Religion of Peace and Kindness"** and announced the establishment of the International Center for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation in Uzbekistan[8].

Conclusion

The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016 marked a turning point in Uzbekistan's religious policy. His administration has increasingly emphasized a more inclusive form of Islam, using religion as a tool for fostering national unity and social stability. While remaining committed to the principles of a secular state, Mirziyoyev has allowed for a gradual relaxation of religious restrictions, fostering greater religious freedom, and reinvigorating the country's rich Islamic heritage. The introduction of reforms such as the expansion of religious education, the reopening of mosques, and the promotion of interfaith dialogue are indicative of a broader strategy to enhance religious tolerance and counter extremist ideologies.

Despite these advancements, Uzbekistan's government remains cautious about the potential rise of political Islam, making it clear that the country's secular framework must remain intact. Mirziyoyev's administration has therefore sought to promote a moderate, nationalized form of Islam that aligns with the state's political and cultural identity, while carefully managing the risk of radicalization. Moving forward, the challenge for Uzbekistan will be to continue nurturing its religious heritage and accommodating religious expression, while ensuring that Islam does not become a tool for political mobilization or extremism.

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