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Ensuring Religious Freedom And Countering Religious Radicalization In The Republic Of Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

The article is dedicated to the analysis of the current state of legislation on religious policy Republic of Uzbekistan. Moreover, measures are proposed to improve the religious policy in the Republic of Uzbekistan in terms of countering the spread of extremist ideology, taking into account modern challenges and threats.

KEYWORDS

Legislation, religious policy, countering extremism, extremist activity, radicalization.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays one of the key directions of the reform strategy is the liberalization of state policy in the field of religion, the development of a culture of tolerance and humanity, the strengthening of interfaith harmony, as well as the creation of the necessary conditions to

meet the religious needs of believers. The current national legislation makes sure to guarantee and ensure the interests of citizens, regardless of their nationality and religious affiliation, and effectively counteract the

manifestation of discrimination based on nationality or attitude to religion.

At the same time, there are vulnerable aspects in the current legislation, an overview and analysis of which is presented below. Some areas of ensuring religious freedom in Uzbekistan, becoming the subject of criticism, are assessed as a consequence of the negative experience of past years [1]. However, in this case, the positive changes of the last 3-4 years and the reasons for the appearance of any established restrictions are not always taken into account.

The evolution of understanding of freedom of conscience and religion over the 30-year period of independence, the problems of law enforcement practice in the field of observing the rights of believers are the most relevant and widely discussed issues in Uzbekistan over the past 3-4 years, which is associated with the new reforms that have begun in the country in this area. Contradictions in legislation and in law enforcement practice in Uzbekistan induce the political elite and experts to objectively and critically assess the forms of religious policy and legislative acts of the past.

This article provides an overview of the forms of religious policy before and since the beginning of independence in Uzbekistan (late 1989s until 2016). As some experts claim, many reasons cause the repressive policy of the early period in the religious sphere, the analysis of which is necessary for us to understand the peculiarities of the conditions in which these forms of the policy and regulatory legal acts were formed, which contributes to the formation of ways out of conservative forms of interpretation of religious freedoms. In addition, this analysis is

very important for assessing the current state of problems, the roots of which go back to the past.

As a result, the long atheistic policy of the Soviet era, the collapse of Soviet ideology, the impact of the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and for a number of other reasons, a revival of Islam was noted in Uzbekistan. At the same time, we can observe a formation of religious-based radical movements. Taking advantage of the liberalization of politics at the end of the M.Gorbachev era, some groups of that time hastily created unauthorized groups that took over the functions of “guardians of Sharia”, organizing disorder in drinking establishments, in shops selling alcohol, insisting on the separate education of boys and girls in schools, etc. De facto, the aim was to create parallel power and parallel legislation, while de jure, these actions fell under the classification of violations of existing regulations.

According to experts, the radicalization of the population (as additional reasons) was stimulated by: a) political instability in the country and the collapse of the financial system and economy, and a natural search for solutions in the “forgotten Shariah”; b) socio-economic problems (unemployment, hyperinflation, etc.); c) the ideological vacuum of the population, a spontaneous reshaping of identities; d) imperfection of regulatory documents, regulating the activities of religious organizations.

Some radicalized groups initiated violent seizures of mosques, driving out of them Muslims loyal to the regime (in Kokand, Andijan, Margilan, Karshi and other cities). Further, groups of Radical Islamists made themselves known in the clashes with the

Meskhetian Turks in May-August 1989, calling for the beating and chasing of the Meskhetian Turks as “bad Muslims”[2]. The new madrasahs created by the radicals, defiantly abandoned legal registrations and built education with a complete rejection of secular sciences. Among the textbooks, which were used to study in these madrasahs, experts recorded manuals on “jihad against the infidels”, other literature of a radical nature. These actions looked like a spontaneous attempt at historical and cultural revenge by some theologians for the atheistic policy in the former USSR [3], however, they generated serious conflict situations, especially in the Fergana Valley, and threatened to further exacerbate conflicts. Such actions seriously alarmed both politicians and the bulk of the population.

During these years, more than 5 thousand mosques functioned in the country, most of which were not registered, and the imams of some large mosques announced their withdrawal from the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and openly promoted the ideas of a islamic state.

Information: The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) is an official organization of muslims of the five Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union – the Kazakh, Kirghiz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek SSR. The headquarters of the organization was located in Tashkent (modern Uzbekistan). SAM of Central Asia and Kazakhstan was founded in 1943 and existed for almost 50 years. After the collapse of the USSR, the former Soviet republics formed their own independent Spiritual Administrations of Muslims.

They began to claim knowledge of “true Islam”, accusing local Muslims for not following religious precepts. New organizations vigorously tried to influence public life and take over government functions. For example, in Namangan, members of the “Adolat” movement patrolled the streets, detained suspicious persons and placed them in their prison. The perpetrators were punished according to Sharia law, in particular, they were beaten with sticks [4].

Thus, with the gaining of independence of Uzbekistan (September 1, 1991), the active part of the Muslim elite insistently demanded a “full-fledged revival of Islam” (as they formulated it), insisting on the restoration of the Islamic state, the abolition of secular laws and “Sharia governance” and secular education.

Radical Islamists tried to seize power by force on the scale of one region (for example, in the Namangan region, December 1991). Moreover, in December 1991, the Islamists (“Islamic police” and the “Adolat” group) seized the building of the regional office (khokimiyat), declared the Namangan region an “Islamic region” and demanded the proclamation of Uzbekistan as an Islamic republic. At the same time, a mass and spontaneous rally in Namangan, which took place in parallel, refused to accept the results of the “coup”, putting forward its own demands of an exclusively economic nature, because there was hyperinflation, lack of food, etc. [5] (see below for details).

Relying on the opinion of the majority, the state stopped these attempts to create a “Sharia state” and “Sharia policy” within the Namangan region. In response, supporters of

the creation of an Islamic state also intensified radical measures of struggle (explosions in public places, murders of representatives of the law, local riots), while trying to justify their actions with Islamic dogmas.

As a result, of the harsh measures of the early 1990s (mass arrests, dissolution of unauthorized religious institutions, etc.), Radical groups mostly immigrated from the country, participating in the global jihad (in Afghanistan, later in the Middle East). Some of them went underground, sometimes claiming to be high-profile terrorist acts (explosions in Tashkent in February 1999, terrorist attacks in 2004-2005).

This kind of tense situation caused a response from the political elites of Uzbekistan and contributed to the tightening of some of the laws relating to the registration of religious organizations, responsibility for religiously motivated extremism and terrorism, etc. At the same time, the norms and guarantees on freedom of religion were legitimized, among other things, in the **Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Articles 31, 57, 61, etc.)**.

The lawyers and especially the employees of law enforcement agencies were in complete confusion. Attempts to bring the prosecutor of the city of Namangan (Fergana Valley) to criminal and administrative responsibility for violations of public order ended with breaking into his office, confiscating criminal cases, demonstratively burning them in the courtyard of the prosecutor's office and the prosecutor was beaten and underwent treatment in the hospital for a month [6].

Fearing the escalation of spontaneous actions into mass disorders, Uzbekistan was the first

of the former Soviet Union republics, which adopt the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan **“On freedom of conscience and religious organizations”** (June 14, 1991) [7]. The Law for the first time enshrined the basic provisions on freedom of religion and religious belief, in accordance with international standards, declared the rejection of atheist politics. At the same time, provisions on the compulsory registration of religious associations and organizations, examination of religious literature and religious items were introduced into the Law. **The State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA)** was indicated as responsible for regulating relations between the state and religious organizations, exercising control over religious education (in order to avoid misteaching about Islam), passing the mandatory registration of religious institutions, etc. Thus, the Law officially announced the rejection of atheistic politics, recognized the rights of believers to freedom of conscience (Articles 1, 2). At the same time, it seriously liberalized the rules for registering religious institutions (Articles 6, 7), and laws on religious freedom (Articles 1, 3), allowed the free opening of mosques, temples and institutions of other confessions, religious educational institutions (Articles 8, 9), subject to registration rules (Article 10).

However, the new Law did not live up to the expectations of the Radical groups, who hoped to receive complete freedom to create their organizations, not concealing their claims to power and the establishment of Sharia law. On the basis of the adopted legislative acts, the activities of all parties and movements calling for an anti-constitutional change in the state system were terminated, unregistered mosques and religious educational institutions were closed.

At the same time, the Law clearly outlined the prohibition for religious organizations to establish their own political and security organizations, the creation and activity of any party of a religious nature, as well as branches, departments of religious parties created outside the republic, etc. (Article 57 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan).

Thus, the Law has accumulated in itself all the contradictions of the period and the beginning of the restless era of the revival of the religion of Islam.

However, the initiators of the return of political status to Islam themselves had an extremely vague idea of the form of government declared by them as “according to Sharia”, without proposing any political or economic program. The overwhelming majority of the population **did not support and still does not support** such forms of the revival of Islam, as well as the replacement of existing laws with the Sharia guidelines. Likewise, the majority of Muslims reject the revival of the political status of Islam [8], considering it sufficient to abandon atheistic politics, open mosques and have the opportunity to receive a religious education, freely perform religious rituals and celebrate holidays. In other words, from the point of view of the majority of the population, Islam is a regulator of personal, family or social ethics.

Further, amendments to the Law “**On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations**” were introduced in 1998 based on flourishing of the activities of various extremist religious organizations in Uzbekistan. The new version of the law banned the activities of all unregistered religious organizations, as well as the

missionary activities of unregistered organizations.

From the beginning of the 1990s to 2016, there were also some gaps in the law enforcement process, and acts of violation of public order were not differentiated by the severity of what was committed. According to human rights organizations, the number of people convicted on charges of religious extremism or participation in banned religious organizations by 2016-2017 amounted up to 10 thousand people [9]. Ultimately, this did not lead to a decrease in the degree of radicalization of some Muslims.

By 2016-2017, it became clear that the laws adopted at the beginning of independence no longer meet new conditions and modern requirements. Since the coming to power of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.Mirziyoyev, he openly announced the existence of a number of problems related to legislative acts and law enforcement practice, including the real implementation of the norms of freedom of religion. In September 2017, Sh. Mirziyoyev, speaking at the **72nd session of the UN General Assembly, proposed the adoption of a special resolution “Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance”**, which is designed to promote the establishment of tolerance and mutual respect, ensure religious freedom, protect the rights of believers, prevent them discrimination. The President also spoke about the need to promote the humanistic essence of Islam, and stressed that the fight against religious extremism solely by force does not justify itself and that, most crimes related to extremist activities and violence are committed by people under 30 years of age. Therefore, the President proposed as an

alternative to educate young people and create conditions for their self-realization, which could create a barrier to the spread of the “virus” of the ideology of violence [10].

In his first pre-election and post-election speeches, the President drew attention to the need to improve legislation, to reform the regulatory framework and law enforcement (investigative and judicial) practice in this area, while simultaneously liberalizing both legislation and its application. The logical sequence of these reforms was the manifestation of the political will of the President in the real implementation of liberalization in this area. Thus, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, over the past three years, more than **20 thousand people** convicted on religious grounds have been pardoned and excluded from the so-called “dark lists”[11].

The existing method of political governance and the principle of decision-making dictated this method of reforms, since the crisis of outdated approaches in this area was obvious.

It is important to note, that during the period of reforms (2016 – present), there is a positive dynamics in the field of ensuring freedom of conscience and religion, large-scale reforms are being carried out to strengthen interethnic, interfaith peace and harmony in the country, to ensure conditions for the realization of the rights of citizens, religious organizations. To date, for citizens professing Islam (this is up to 94% of the population), conditions have been created for the unimpeded fulfillment of five pillars – the obligations of Islam. That is, believers can freely perform their rituals in temples, and Muslims in mosques and outside mosques and also make a pilgrimage – Hajj. For the

convenience of foreign pilgrims, the State Committee for Development of Tourism obliged all hotels in the republic to provide guests with the Koran, the Bible and the Torah free of charge. Moreover the national airline “O‘zbekiston Havo Yo‘llari” (Uzbek Airlines) has opened a 24-hour prayer room at the Tashkent airport. At the same time, the Government launched a program worth 3 billion sums (\$ 367,000) to reconstruct mosques, cemeteries and places of worship. For the first time, O‘zstandart introduced the Halal certification system, which sets requirements for the production, storage, transportation and sale of food products in accordance with the canons of Islam. The same conditions have been created for representatives of other confessions and missionary churches [12].

To raise the status of the religion, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Uzbekistan organized a nationwide competition of the Koran reciters. It turned out to be quite in demand – five thousand people applied for it. The first Islamic online radio appeared in Uzbekistan, courses on the study of the Koran and the Arabic language were opened. All other prescribed rituals are freely performed. At the same time, the issue of teenagers visiting mosques has been positively resolved, which was the subject of long discussions within the country[13], including among Muslim theologians themselves, some of whom (including the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan) were against teenagers’ attendance at midday and Friday prayers.

At the same time, some questions of a legal nature arise among the population, one way or another related to the exercise of religious freedoms.

Firstly, regarding the wearing of hijabs in public. As far as we know, this also causes problems in neighboring countries of the region (for example, in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan), as well as in European countries (primarily in France).

As for Uzbekistan, it cannot be said that the ban on wearing hijabs was in direct conflict with the provisions of the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion [14]. At the same time, in the Laws, the religious dress code is not spelled out in clear formulas, which also leads to legal uncertainty.

Nevertheless, this conflict was resolved in the course of long discussions, based on the wishes of the part of the believers who insisted on wearing the hijab in schools, colleges and universities. A compromise form of hijab in the form of a national headscarf was proposed by the President Sh. Mirziyoyev [15].

Secondly, complex social changes, internal discussions in society in one way or another are reflected in the real advancement of a more liberal understanding of religious and other freedoms in society in the legal and political spheres of Uzbekistan.

Thirdly, in the process of incidents of this kind, it became obvious that changes in legislative and especially in law enforcement practice are associated with many circumstances of a social nature, in particular, the perception of law, legal culture of the population, and so on, which generally reflects the difficulties in promoting reforms in the field of compliance with the entire complex of legislation and freedom of believers. Furthermore, the existing rights in the religious sphere are perceived by believers differently.

Moreover, even the perception of Islam, in terms of existing laws, is also diverse. A recent poll by the “Public Opinion” Center showed that among Uzbeks, the number of people who consider their family’s lifestyle to be secular has decreased by 14%. More than half of the respondents (52%) expressed a desire to make the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). At the same time, a significant part of the population (78.5%) is familiar only with certain requirements of Islam. In general, the overwhelming majority of Muslim believers positively assess the work of the authorities in the field of religion (90%) and believe that their religious freedoms are fully realized. Nevertheless, there are also respondents (7.3%) who believe that an increase in religiosity can threaten the secular character of the state. Only an insignificant part of the respondents (0.8%) believe that for the full realization of religious freedoms, it is necessary to create an Islamic state with Sharia rule [17].

It should be claimed, that legislators and law enforcement agencies are often faced with the problem of choosing between maintaining security in order to prevent manifestations of religiously motivated extremism and terrorism, on the one hand, and, on the other, ensuring freedom of religion.

The existing imperfections in the regulatory framework and law enforcement practice in Uzbekistan are also conditioned by the fact that it is necessary to take into account the current religious situation in the country, in particular, to correlate reforms with the peculiarities of the revival of religion, sometimes very aggressive. In addition, one has to bear in mind the excessive conservative nature of Islam among the population in

Uzbekistan. This, on the one hand, complicates law enforcement, and on the other, it creates conditions when the norms of secular legislation are poorly perceived, or hardly perceived by believers. This is evidenced by a huge amount of religious literature, the authors of which do not operate with the concepts of the normative legal provisions of the existing legal system of the state, as secular in origin. In other words, the existing legislation in religious discourses is practically ignored.

On the other hand, a significant part of the Muslims of Uzbekistan sometimes prefer the so-called "Parallel" norms of law, dating back to Sharia attitudes. This, for example, concerns the norms of the distribution of inheritance, some norms of marriage relations (for example, the real precedents of polygamy), early marriages by coercion of parents, restrictions on women in social life, the use of violence against them, polygamy, forcing them to wear hijabs in religious families, refusal to receive loans, etc.

In general, the difficult situation associated with a distorted understanding of the precepts of Islam shows all the difficulties of the reforms. In other words, the need for reform and a change in strategy in the liberalization of the law in the face of the crisis of the previous methods of solving such problems, so a number of similar problems pose their own tasks that need to be addressed here and now.

Meanwhile, it is necessary to enforce laws without hurting the religious feelings of even the most conservative part of the population. It is in this area that a number of problems and conflicts are observed that leave room for criticism of law enforcement agencies, which

it is quite easy to accuse of violating the freedom to follow religious customs, especially when they contradict the existing legislation.

It should be noted that a fundamentally new social atmosphere is currently being formed in the country, including in relation to religion. As it was said, the peculiarity of these reforms in the legislative sphere is that they are most often initiated by the President personally, who emphasizes the need for a more flexible policy in the sphere of religion, revision of regulatory legal acts in this area with an indispensable condition for observing the norms of the Constitution, taking into account international experience. and improving laws guaranteeing religious freedom [18].

The positions of state bodies are also gradually changing towards liberalization. The main directions and tasks in this area remain to improve the current legislation and law enforcement practice, with the real implementation of freedom of religion, including the differentiation of the norms of criminal and administrative legislation, decriminalization of some articles of the criminal and administrative code when it comes to socially not dangerous acts.

The implementation of the constitutional principle of freedom of conscience, the social adaptation of persons who, by mistake, found themselves in the composition of banned organizations was facilitated by measures to humanize state policy in the religious sphere.

In the last 3 years, on the basis of decrees of the Head of State, more than 3.5 thousand persons who were serving a sentence of imprisonment for committing crimes of a terrorist and extremist nature, who sincerely

repented of their deeds and firmly embarked on the path of reform were pardoned.

The legal basis is the Presidential Decrees “On approval of the regulation on the procedure for the implementation of pardons in the Republic of Uzbekistan” (of 2018), the Procedure for the release from criminal liability of citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan who, by mistake, found themselves in the composition of terrorist, extremist or other prohibited organizations and groups (of 2018.), and also created a special Republican interdepartmental commission (headed by the Prosecutor General), which makes it possible to apply with an application through the diplomatic missions of Uzbekistan at the place of stay of the above persons abroad. This mechanism provides citizens who have realized the illegality of their actions and have embarked on the path of correction, the opportunity to return to their homeland, to their families, a peaceful life.

It was these developed mechanisms that facilitated the implementation of humanitarian operations “Mehr-1”, “Mehr-2” and “Mehr-3”.

Uzbekistan has developed and carried out a unique experience at the state level on the return of its citizens from the "Middle East".

On May 30, 2019, within the framework of the Mehr-1 special project, 156 persons (48 women, 1 man, 107 children, of which 9 were orphans) were repatriated to Uzbekistan from Syria, who were part of the international terrorist organization Islamic State in the Syrian - Iraqi zone and were captured by the Kurdish armed forces of the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF).

On October 10, 2019, within the framework of the special project "Mehr-2" on behalf of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 64 persons were repatriated to Uzbekistan from Iraq (39 boys and 25 girls, of which 14 were children under the age of 3 years old and 2 were left without parents) who were part of the international terrorist organization "Islamic State" in the Syrian-Iraqi zone. It should be noted that the parents of these children, being members of various international terrorist organizations, are currently imprisoned in Iraq for a period of 10-20 years for threatening the peace and tranquility of citizens of other states, or serving life sentences in prisons. They received permission to take their children home.

As part of the special operation "Mehr-3" on December 8, 2020, 98 citizens of Uzbekistan - 25 women and 73 children (14 of them are orphans who have lost both parents) were returned to their homeland from Syria.

At the same time, the state has undertaken obligations of assistance (including financial) in relation to amnestied and repatriated citizens. In the regions and cities of the country, special commissions have been created from among the local executive authorities, law enforcement, religious, and public organizations. The goal is active joint work of state and public organizations for the social and economic integration of these citizens.

The integration of the repatriates ran into a number of legal conflicts. First, formally they were lawbreakers (illegal immigration from the country, illegal border crossing, assistance to terrorist organizations, etc.). Secondly, they all lost or destroyed their passports, found

themselves homeless, had no profession and no means of subsistence, etc. To get a job, loans, etc. procedures needed documents. The lawyers were in a difficult situation, since they almost never encountered such cases. These problems were overcome by the President's decree. All adult women underwent a judicial investigation and, as a result, were pardoned and amnestied in accordance with the Presidential Decree ("On the approval of the regulation on the procedure for the implementation of pardons"). And also, the documents of the repatriates were restored, the rights to credit, financial assistance, etc. were granted [19].

It seems that this important experience needs to be consolidated by law, since a positive solution to the above problems was solved only by administrative resources and instruments.

CONCLUSION

The continuing complexity of the religious situation, latent and open conflicts in the sphere of the combination of religious norms (mainly Muslim), on the one hand, and the existing legislation, on the other, makes its own adjustments to the implementation of religious freedoms in Uzbekistan. Added to this are the danger of radicalization (primarily young people), cyber security challenges (open and massive recruitment to radical groups through cyber networks), lack of experience in building communication strategies in cyber space, in using "soft power" in business stabilization of the religious situation, etc.

Currently, there is no common understanding of the essence of the very phenomenon of

extremism and extremist crimes. The lack of clear concepts, differentiation of extremist crimes leads to difficulties in law enforcement practice. It is important not only to determine the unlawfulness of certain extremist acts, their punishability, but also to form a clear conceptual apparatus, a hierarchy of principles, subjects of counteraction to this phenomenon. In legal practice, to date, the exact delineation of the concepts of terrorism, religious extremism, separatism, fundamentalism, etc. is not legally enshrined, which does not give law enforcement agencies the correct approach to work on prevention, prevention, suppression and qualification, the presence or absence of a socially dangerous act, the guilt of the person who committed this act, and other circumstances that are important for the correct resolution of the case.

The composition and quality of the Muslim community in Uzbekistan is far from uniform. Believers (primarily Muslims) have their own - most often mutually exclusive - opinions regarding religious freedoms, dress codes, norms and rules of relations between the state and religion, and other issues. The Muslim community of Uzbekistan is characterized by stormy internal discussions (sometimes reaching conflicts) on all issues specified in the Report. Thus, the regulation of the most complicated relations within the Muslim community also falls on the shoulders of law enforcement agencies, authorities and society itself. All this complicates the situation and forces one to be extremely careful in choosing strategies for religious policy and legal regulation of religious freedoms, as well as to seriously discuss the norms of legislation with society.

The same circumstances force one to be balanced in the initiation and implementation of legal norms when it comes to religious communities, some of which do not always positively perceive the dominant of the law. Consequently, not only law enforcement and regulatory bodies, but also the believers themselves, at least the most active part of them, should go their own way of evolution in favor of recognizing laws as the only instrument for regulating relations "religion-state".

Unfortunately, external assessments do not take into account these complexities and offer a one-sided and extremely limited view of the problems, or operate on outdated data. The same conditions, associated with a serious divergence of opinions within society and among legal scholars with respect to the 2018 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Organizations, seriously delay the necessary consensus among the public and legal scholars. This led to a delay in the adoption of this document. In addition, international experience suggests that such documents should be guided not only by the declarations on freedom of religions adopted in other countries, but also by the specifics of their own situation within the country. The adoption of such a document without reaching the necessary social and legal consensus, without taking into account their own cultural and historical traditions, as well as international experience, can lead to unpredictable consequences.

The reforms are making their own adjustments to the former strict forms of control over the religious situation and the activity of religious institutions. The reforms also affected the sphere of legislative

initiatives and law enforcement. The relaxation and liberalization in these areas are obvious.

At the same time, a number of legal problems remain, which hinder the liberalization of religious freedoms. These problems are solvable and cannot be justified by referring to a difficult situation. In particular, the current laws use some terms (for example, "fundamentalism") that are not formulated as legal terms containing a clear definition of their social danger or as a form of encroachment on the constitutional order. Other terms ("extremism", "radicalism"), in fact, have not changed their definitions since the pre-reform era, do not differentiate them (for example, as violent and non-violent forms, in the case of extremism). This leads to the fact that when passing sentences, the judges do not have the opportunity to differentiate the punishment in accordance with the gravity of the act.

A positive consequence of the reforms should also be assessed that state bodies are beginning to understand that problems in the religious sphere cannot be solved with the help of only one-time administrative and legal acts (for example, in the form of Resolutions and Decrees of the President). In addition, for a number of reasons, Uzbekistan is trying to respond to external criticism regarding the implementation of religious freedoms, which is associated with the obligation to fulfill signed international agreements, declarations, improve the investment climate, increase stability as a guarantor of tourism development, etc.

New approaches should be explored to address the following issues:

Firstly, during the independence, the state failed to sufficiently strengthen the idea of national independence in the minds of citizens. As the feeling of involvement in the reform process of the country remained weak, the legal consciousness and political culture in the society did not sufficiently develop. As a result, society has been in constant search of more attractive ideas, which affects the worldview of people.

Furthermore, the problem of religious radicalization is linked to weak rule of law and democracy in the country. Although the government launched numerous reforms since 2017, the international rating shows Uzbekistan still has to do a lot to improve its rule of law position. A high level of corruption, human rights violations as well as property and a lack of independence in judiciary make people search for political alternatives to democracy. Indeed, it is not a problem of democracy, but rather a problem of failed state. It is for this reasons that some Muslim groups in the country blame democracy for the state failure and seek solution to social injustice and failure in state building through constructing an Islamic state.

Secondly, some problems in law enforcement and in the implementation of state policy in the field of religion led to the appearance of an “abyss” (ideological and political alienation) between the state and society, undermining confidence in the authorities, and causing a negative resonance in the country and abroad. In fact, the state is losing the “battle for minds”, primarily in the information field (in the internet space). In particular, a number of Islamic sites in the “uz” domain openly oppose the reforms of the state, seriously discredit it and impose an

exclusively Islamic worldview on the visitor (especially young people) with a complete denial of the secular system and democratic values.

This situation leads to the formation of prerequisites that can lead to the appeal of certain segments of the population to alternative ideas. (This situation creates the threat of the appearance of prerequisites under which the bulk of the population may turn to alternative ideologies).

Thirdly, in recent years, the strengthening of religious identity over national is taking place at an accelerated pace in society. Arguments about justice, about goals in life are increasingly occurring through the prism of religious values, rather than national customs, secular laws and ideas. This is observed even among quite prosperous, socially integrated, educated citizens.

There is an imposition of subcultural symbols, norms of behavior and life, an impact on the ways of thinking and perceiving the world. Questions of morality and correct behavior are interpreted, inter alia, through the media, mainly by representatives of religion.

As a result, there are certain risks of citizens falling under the influence of conservative views and customs. This can gradually lead to the Radicalization of the main part of the electorate, which, as a result, can lead to the influence of Islamic norms on political processes, when more and more people will come out with demands to bring the country's legislation in line with Sharia norms.

As a result, in the medium term, security risks increase for the country's development as a secular democratic state with a strong civil society.

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