

## Religious policy in Uzbekistan: between liberalisation, state ideology and Islamisation

Schmitz, Andrea

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SWP Research Paper

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*Andrea Schmitz*

# Religious Policy in Uzbekistan

Between Liberalisation, State Ideology and Islamisation



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

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- The religious policy innovations that Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev has initiated in the name of liberalisation and reform continue the policies of his predecessor in key aspects.
- Under the motto "enlightenment against ignorance", state influence over the religious knowledge taught in educational and research institutions has been strengthened. The country's Islamic heritage is proactively used for representative purposes and held up as an integral part of national culture.
- The religious policy measures that amount to a "secularisation" of Islam through scientification and musealisation do not reach large sections of society. For the ordinary believer, Islam is not a science but a matter of belief, a system of rules and convictions that guides the way they live.
- The liberalisation of the media landscape means that religious advice is available in abundance. It often includes propaganda transporting illiberal ideas, but the state intervenes only selectively.
- The liberalisation of religious policy has resulted in a growing Islamisation of the population. The authoritarian state headed by President Mirziyoyev is thus being consolidated. Repression remains the means of choice should Islamic milieus seriously challenge the secular state.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Andrea Schmitz*

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Stiftung Wissenschaft und  
Politik  
German Institute  
for International  
and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Germany  
Phone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-200  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

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*Dr Andrea Schmitz is Senior Associate in the Eastern Europe  
and Eurasia Research Division.*

## **Religious Policy in Uzbekistan Between Liberalisation, State Ideology and Islamisation**

As Central Asia's most populous country, with a population of 36 million, Uzbekistan has always played a key role in the region. This is all the more true since the accession of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016. His change of course, which has repercussions for the entire region, has also changed the way Islam is dealt with. Uzbekistan's religious policy is paradigmatic of the attempt to employ religion as a state power resource. This strategy, which consolidates rather than loosens authoritarian rule, has not yet been tested in Central Asia and is associated with risks and side effects.

Uzbekistan is an authoritarian secular state with a Muslim majority society whose constitution prescribes the separation of state and religion. Western political and policy-related researchers are especially interested in the contradictions between the secular principle and constitutional reality. Consequently, religious policy always comes into focus when the state intervenes in the field of religion and thereby violates the constitution and the rights of believers enshrined therein. The religious field itself appears largely as a sphere of exertion of – and resistance to – state power. Its actors are depicted as victims, whose capacity to act is small and whose voices are weak. The discursive dynamics within the religious field are not captured, nor is the interaction between the secular and religious elite and the specific context that structures this interaction.

In order to shed more light on this context and thus on the tensions between religion and politics in Uzbekistan, this research takes a closer look at path dependencies. It becomes clear that the religious policy initiatives launched under President Mirziyoyev continue the policies of his predecessor in central aspects. This is particularly evident in legislation. Rather than relaxing existing rules and regulations, these have been confirmed but spelled out in greater detail (for example the legal frameworks for the religious organisations and the education system).

The secular and religious elites share the conviction that Islam plays a key role in national identity. The most important instrument for instilling this in

the population is education policy. Religious knowledge has become an important symbolic resource, and numerous autodidacts respond to the demand for Islamic education. In order to bring religious education out of the shadows of informal private circles, from which the secular elite has faced dangerous competition in the past, the state has greatly expanded its role in this sphere since 2017. Specialised research institutes have been founded to create a “civic” Islam and to disseminate approved interpretations of the faith. The state’s educational offensive responds to the religious needs of society and the growing influence of the religious elite. At the same time, the state reserves the right to determine what is taught in the name of Islam and who is entitled to do so.

State supervision of the religious field has been strengthened through tighter centralisation and denser inter-institutional connectivity. The state *Committee for Religious Affairs* (CRA) now de facto supervises even those institutions for which the Spiritual Administration, the *Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan* (DMU), is nominally responsible. The state’s efforts to control religious educational institutions and research institutes even encompass curriculum design and are recognisably aimed at defusing religious distinctions. Thus, in the language of the secular education bureaucracy, principles and regulations based on religion become “traditional” values and general moral concepts, and Islam is transformed into an ethics of action adapted to the needs of the modern Uzbek developmental state.

The concept of “spiritual enlightenment” plays a significant role in this context. It emerged under Mirziyoyev’s predecessor Islam Karimov and stands for an essentially secular state doctrine. It recognises Islam as an elementary component of the national culture. Symbolic and economically exploitable aspects of the Muslim religion are specifically promoted (monumental new buildings, expansion of pilgrimage tourism), Islamic education, art and scholarship are used and marketed for state representation.

The “secularisation” of Islam through scientification and musealisation is supported by the political elite and widely shared by an urban segment of society that is closely tied to the state and at home in a secular educational tradition. However, their “secular” understanding of religion has little influence on the practices of believers. What counts for the latter is that they can now practise their religion comparatively

freely. Most of them are aware that the state closely controls the field of religion, and this undoubtedly has a disciplinary effect. Believers know the limits of what is permitted and know that the authorities can intervene at any time if they feel that these limits have been exceeded. Nevertheless, the religious space is surprisingly autonomous.

The reason for this is the liberalisation of the media landscape, which is a key part of Mirziyoyev’s reform agenda. The official commitment to freedom of opinion and speech has given rise to a lively blogging scene. Like in the democratic West, anyone who wishes may express themselves on the internet. Consequently, religious experts are also active online, offering information and instruction. They include influential actors who undermine the state’s efforts to create a more “secular” Islam by insisting on the distinction between state laws and divine commandment and, in the case of contradictions, declaring the latter to take precedence. Among ordinary believers, whose need for proper knowledge about Islam is enormous, the online preachers enjoy an authority with which the secularised teachings of state institutions cannot compete.

Illiberal ideas are also propagated in this discursive space, primarily concerning the constitutional principles of equality and tolerance. This part of the religious field is not fully covered by the state system of surveillance, censorship and punishment. It is apparently even selectively tolerated. On the one hand, the views held there overlap with those of the official clergy and the secular elite; on the other hand, it is easier to monitor the discourse if specific outlets for extreme positions are tolerated. In this way, state policy encourages a growing Islamisation that is largely immune to Western influence.

# Uzbekistan's Religious-Political Heritage

As in the other Central Asian republics, Sunni Islam is the dominant religion in Uzbekistan and is actively practised by a large majority. It is estimated that Muslims represent between 88 or 96 per cent<sup>1</sup> of the total population of 36 million (January 2023),<sup>2</sup> with the overwhelming majority belonging to the Sunni denomination. Uzbekistan's religious policy is therefore primarily directed at Muslims, and it is the imagined and lived Islam to which state intervention refers.<sup>3</sup> According to the constitution, Uzbekistan is a secular state in which state and religion are strictly separated; it guarantees its citizens freedom of conscience and the right to profess any religion or none at all.<sup>4</sup> This secular form, which Uzbekistan shares with the other Muslim-majority republics in the region, is a consequence of the Soviet modernisation programme, which the Uzbek state has upheld since independence in 1991.

This still applies – even more so – to the period since 2016. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uz-

bekistan has developed dynamically. Although the liberalisation of the economy and society that Mirziyoyev has undertaken will not change the authoritarian character of the regime, it has opened up the previously largely closed-off country to the outside world and created opportunities for its citizens.<sup>5</sup> This also applies to religious life, although Uzbekistan's new religious policy still follows historical parameters in central aspects. This applies above all to the secular approach to religion and the integration of Islam into concepts of tradition and nation. Furthermore, the “securitisation” of Islam – the perception of religion as a security threat – is the result of social dislocations that began in the last decade of the Soviet era and challenged the post-communist elite under President Islam Karimov (1991 – 2016) after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The state's reactions to those challenges have shaped Uzbekistan's current religious policy reforms, and are therefore worth reviewing.

## Islamist challenges of the early years

The religious elite (*Ulamā*) in Uzbekistan, as in all of Central Asia, is dominated by the *Hanafi* school of law (*mazhab*)<sup>6</sup> and is controlled by the state. During the late Soviet period, from around the 1970s, the secular regime was unsettled by followers of a current of Islam that had hitherto been marginal in Central Asia.<sup>7</sup> They followed a strand of tradition rooted in

1 Approximately 2.2 per cent of the population are members of the Russian Orthodox Church. There are also numerous smaller religious minorities: United States Department of State, *Uzbekistan 2021 International Religious Freedom Report* (Washington, D.C., 2 June 2022), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/UZBEKISTAN-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf> (accessed 3 June 2023).

2 Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Demographic Situation in the Republic of Uzbekistan*, 28 January 2023, <https://stat.uz/en/press-center/news-of-committee/34200-demographic-situation-in-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-2> (accessed 3 June 2023).

3 Accordingly, unless otherwise noted, the terms “religion” and “religious policy” in the following refer to Islam and Islam policy in Uzbekistan.

4 *The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, Art. 1, 35 and 75, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6451070> (accessed 3 June 2023). These principles were already effective in the 1992 Constitution, which was in force until 30 April 2023 (Articles 61 and 31).

5 Andrea Schmitz, *Uzbekistan's Transformation: Strategies and Perspectives*, SWP Research Paper 12/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2020), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/uzbekistans-transformation> (accessed 3 June 2023).

6 One of the four legal traditions of Sunni Islam, established in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent in the eighth century CE, and later in Anatolia and the Balkans.

7 In detail: Andrea Schmitz, *Islam in Tajikistan: Actors, Discourses, Conflicts*, SWP Research Paper 3/2015 (Berlin: Stiftung

Arab ritual purism and were therefore called “Wahabis” (*vahhobylyar*) by their opponents. They demanded that local religious practice, which also tolerated customs such as pilgrimage, be realigned with the core sources — the Koran as the revealed word of God and the Sunna, the body of sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet. The “renewers” (*mujaddidlar*), as they called themselves, held disparate doctrinal and orthopractical positions. What united them was their opposition to the Hanafi establishment, which in their eyes had become subservient to state power.

In the 1980s, the “restructuring” (*perestroika*) and “opening” (*glasnost*) of Soviet society under party leader Mikhail Gorbachev led to a religious liberalisation. In Uzbekistan, this intensified the dispute between the conservative Hanafite scholars and the politicised younger generation of Muslim intellectuals and autodidacts. Their politicised interpretations of religious traditions met with resistance from the Hanafite ‘Ulamā, who rejected the political demands of the “Wahabis”, as well as their dogmatic and ritual innovations.<sup>8</sup>

Towards the end of the 1980s, which were marked by a revival of national tradition and culture, secular intellectuals joined together to form a popular front called *Birlik* (“Unity”) — from which the party *Erk* (“Freedom”) split in 1990. One of *Birlik*’s central demands, that the Uzbek language be given a higher status than Russian, resulted in a law in 1989 that put the Uzbek language on an equal footing with Russian.<sup>9</sup> The Muslim “renewers”, who were mainly active in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley, also organised. Various groups emerged seeking to give Islam more weight in politics and society and advocating that state policy should be guided by Islamic principles. Some of these groups called for the establishment of an Islamic state; they formed vigilante

groups to enforce Islamic legal norms and increasingly confronted the state with their demands.<sup>10</sup>

The post-communist rulers, represented by Islom Karimov, who had been elected president of the independent Uzbek state in December 1991, reacted to the challenge by disbanding the Islamist groups and arresting their leaders. Some of the activists managed to escape abroad, mainly to Afghanistan and Tajikistan, from where they continued the fight against the regime in Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan, the power struggle between the *United Tajik Opposition* (UTO), an alliance of secular and Islamist forces, and the post-communist regime triggered a civil war in 1992.<sup>11</sup> In Afghanistan, order disintegrated after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989. The ongoing civil war and Pakistani and Saudi support for the Islamist resistance paved the way for the rise of the Taliban. In 1996, they captured Kabul and provided a retreat for Islamists who had fled from Uzbekistan.

In 1998, two well-known activists from the Ferghana Valley, Tohir Yo’ldoshev and Jumaboy Hojiyev Namangoni, founded the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IBU) in Afghanistan, which later became part of the Al-Qaida network.<sup>12</sup> The movement made another appearance in Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000 (see p. 10f.). In fact, however, militant Islamist resistance in Uzbekistan was effectively eliminated by 1992. The following year, Karimov also had the secular opposition parties *Erk* and *Birlik* banned, putting an end to the brief Uzbek spring.

The prohibition on Islamist movements and the condemnation of political Islam were accompanied by greater control of the religious institutions, which stood under the authority of the clerical administra-

Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2015), 9, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/islam-in-tajikistan> (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtiyar Babadjanov and Muzaffar Kamilov, “Muhammadjan Hindustani (1892–1989) and the Beginning of the ‘Great Schism’ among the Muslims of Uzbekistan”, in *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)*, ed. Stéphane A. Dudoignon and Hisao Komatsu (London et al.: Routledge, 2001), 195–220.

<sup>9</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley et al.: Berkeley University Press, 2007), 153f.

<sup>10</sup> Babadjanov and Kamilov, “Muhammadjan Hindustani” (see note 8), 205f.; Ashirbek Muminov, “Traditional and Modern Religious-Theological Schools in Central Asia”, in *Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia*, ed. Lena Jonson and Murad Esenov (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 1999), 101–11 (109f.); Khalid, *Islam after Communism* (see note 9), 140f.

<sup>11</sup> On this, Schmitz, *Islam in Tajikistan* (see note 7), 10–14.

<sup>12</sup> On the IBU: Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven et al.: Yale University Press, 2002), 137–86; Martha Brill Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad* (Washington, D.C., et al.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 253–85; Bakhtiar Babadzhonov, “Islam in Uzbekistan: From the Struggle for ‘Religious Purity’ to Political Activism”, in *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?* ed. Boris Z. Rumer (Armonk: Sharpe, 2002), 299–330 (314–19).

tion, the *Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan* (DMU).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the regime used them as a resource to create a new state ideology that also took up central demands of the secular opposition.

## Educational initiatives

The new state ideology developed under President Karimov had three pillars:

- Reinforcement of the Uzbek language and culture, and local customs (*urf va odat*), which had also been cultivated under Soviet rule;
- A historiography underlining Uzbekistan's independence, its nation-building, and a strong, centralised and secular developmental state as the quasi-natural historical *telos*;<sup>14</sup>
- Hanafi Islam as the foundation of national culture and history, as well as the source of spiritual values that hold Uzbek society together.

In the course of the repositioning of the Islamic heritage within the framework of the new secular state ideology, mosques and madrasas that had been used for other purposes during Soviet rule were returned to their original functions. In 1991, the Koran was translated into Uzbek for the first time, and religious education was expanded.<sup>15</sup> Studying at Arab universities became more attractive to a growing number of Uzbeks and religious literature was imported en masse from Arab countries. Under the charismatic Mufti Mohammad Sodyq Mohammad Yusuf, popular writings by non-Hanafi, mainly Arab, authors were also included in the curricula of religious educational institutions (see p. 10).

On the other hand, there was also a revival of traditional practices such as pilgrimage, which the reformers rejected. However, Mohammad Sodyq did not succeed in overcoming the division between traditionalists and reformers within the 'Ulamā. The mufti, who was probably too independent for the

state authorities and parts of the clergy, was forced to resign in January 1993. Under his successor, political compliance and conformism returned to the clerical administration.<sup>16</sup> The interaction between the DMU and state organs brought Muslim religious practices back into public life. At the same time, it promoted an apolitical, permissive "Uzbek" Islam that excluded religious interference in politics.<sup>17</sup>

### "Uzbek" Islam is apolitical.

Secular and religious elites shared the conviction that Islam had a key role to play in national identity and the ideology that underpinned it.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, an Islamisation of society was to be avoided. The norms of the secular state – rather than religion – were to guide the everyday actions of the population. It was therefore necessary to selectively cultivate those aspects of Islam that could be put at the service of state policy and fit into the new grand narrative of a strong, independent nation-state based on centuries of history and "Uzbek" tradition.

For this purpose, the Soviet-era school subject "scientific atheism" was replaced by the new compulsory subject of "spirituality and enlightenment" (*ma'naviyat va ma'rifat*). To this day, pupils are taught that values and moral concepts propagated as the "national" culture are the product of a specifically "Uzbek" Islam.<sup>19</sup> This positively connoted "Uzbek" Islam was distinguished from the politicised Islam of the "Wahabis", which was treated as the Islam of the uneducated and equated with political extremism. On the one hand, "spiritual enlightenment" was fully in the tradition of Soviet pedagogy and didactics, as reflected in the transfer of Soviet-era concepts and

13 The Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan (DMU) emerged in 1993 from the Spiritual Directorate of Central Asian Muslims (SADUM). See Schmitz, *Islam in Tajikistan* (see note 7), 8.

14 See Andrew F. March, "From Leninism to Karimovism: Hegemony, Ideology, and Authoritarian Legitimation", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19, no. 4 (2003): 307–36.

15 In detail: Martha Brill Olcott and Diora Ziyaeva, *Islam in Uzbekistan: Religious Education and State Ideology*, Russia and Eurasia Program, no. 91 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2008), 33–37.

16 Bakhtyar Babadjanov and Stéphane Dudoignon, "Islam officiel contre islam politique en Ouzbékistan aujourd'hui: la Direction des Musulmans et les groupes non-hanafi", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 31, no. 3 (2000): 151–64 (159f.); Martha Brill Olcott, *A Face of Islam: Muhammad-Sodiq Muhammad-Yusuf*, Russia and Eurasia Program, no. 82 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2007).

17 Adeeb Khalid, "Ulama and the State in Uzbekistan", *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, no. 5 (2014): 517–35 (528–30); Babadjanov and Dudoignon, "Islam officiel" (see note 16), 162.

18 Olcott and Ziyaeva, *Islam in Uzbekistan* (see note 15), 2.

19 Olcott and Ziyaeva, *Islam in Uzbekistan* (see note 15), 17f.; Rafael Sattarov, "Spirituality and Enlightenment": *Uzbekistan's State-Backed Ideological Policy*, Central Asia Program Papers 196 (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, October 2017).

constructs into a now national Uzbek context.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the subject also included basic knowledge about Islam, which was to be taught using “scientific methods”, i.e. in the style of classical school subjects.

The attempt to secularise religious education and instrumentalise Islam for the construction of a new state ideology was only partially successful. Firstly, access to Islamic sources of knowledge had expanded considerably when controls on religion were relaxed in the 1980s. The religious education institutions under the authority of the DMU – the renowned *Mir-i Arab-Madrasa* in Bukhara, the *Imam al-Bukhari Institute* in Tashkent (which had been responsible for training imams), and nine secondary schools and colleges established after 1991 – now included texts by reformist scholars in their curricula so that clerical training no longer adhered exclusively to the Hanafi school.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the reduction of Islam to a secular code of values was unwelcome to the growing number of self-taught religious scholars, who had long since internalised the essential views of the Muslim “innovators” and passed them on in private circles.

Secondly, the lack of suitable Islamic education teachers for secular schools, especially in the provinces, meant that graduates of religious schools were often used instead. Thus, in many cases, “spiritual enlightenment” turned into religious instruction.<sup>22</sup> Secular universities that offered Islamic studies – the *Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies*, the *Pedagogical Institute* and the *Tashkent Islamic University (TIU)*, which was opened in 1999 as a secular alternative to the *Imam al-Bukhari Institute* – also often had graduates from religious educational institutions as teachers.<sup>23</sup> This undermined the secularisation of religious teaching, which now included educational content that deviated from the state-sanctioned Hanafi consensus.

## Exclusion and repression

A third factor that contributed significantly to the popularity of dissenting doctrines was the ongoing persecution of religious activists. They criticised the

widespread corruption and self-enrichment of the state elite and contrasted the politically submissive, academic Islam of the religious functionaries with a Muslim ethic adapted to the practical needs of society. The regime sought to suppress such developments as soon as they gained meaningful traction. Leading activists from this milieu had therefore left for Afghanistan at an early stage and founded the IBU there (see p. 8).

When bombings rocked Tashkent in February 1999, the regime blamed the IBU. Although the group did not claim responsibility for the attacks, its leaders were sentenced to death in absentia later that year. Hundreds of alleged IBU supporters were arrested and six were sentenced to death. Shortly afterwards, in the summer of 2000, the IBU turned its attention to Uzbekistan: an armed group of IBU fighters took Japanese geologists hostage in the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border region, demanded unhindered entry into Uzbekistan and declared “holy war” on the Tashkent regime. The hostages were released after the Japanese government paid a ransom. The following summer, a group of American tourists were taken hostage, but they managed to escape.<sup>24</sup>

Following the American invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 2001, the IBU shifted its focus from Central Asia to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Uzbekistan supported the Western allies in the war in Afghanistan, providing NATO with two military bases in the south of the country for supply logistics. It thus became an important partner of Western states. The Uzbek leadership was able to capitalise on this to boost its international standing,<sup>25</sup> and the NATO-led fight against militant Islam also provided the regime with a narrative to justify its tough domestic policies.<sup>26</sup> For example, it has never been conclusively clarified whether the *Islamic Jihad Union*, an alleged splinter group of the IBU that attracted attention in 2004 with suicide attacks on the American and Israeli embassies in Tashkent, was possibly, at least initially, a covert organisation of the Uzbek secret service.<sup>27</sup>

20 Seraphine F. Maerz, “Ma’naviyat in Uzbekistan: An Ideological Extrication from Its Soviet Past?” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 205–22.

21 Olcott and Ziyaeva, *Islam in Uzbekistan* (see note 15), 25.

22 Olcott and Ziyaeva, *Islam in Uzbekistan* (see note 15), 14–17.

23 Olcott and Ziyaeva, *Islam in Uzbekistan* (see note 15), 19.

24 Khalid, *Islam after Communism* (see note 9), 158f.

25 Andrea Schmitz, “Whose Conditionality? The Failure of EU Sanctions on Uzbekistan”, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 11 November 2009, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/11944-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2009-11-11-art-11944.html> (accessed 3 June 2023).

26 Khalid, *Islam after Communism* (see note 9), 169f.

27 “Monitor: Ehemaliger Geheimdienstoffizier beschuldigt den usbekischen Geheimdienst, die Islamische Jihad Union ursprünglich gegründet zu haben”, *Presseportal*, 25 September

## The events of Andijon remain unaddressed.

The sad climax of the struggle against Islamist extremism, in the name of which the regime of Islam Karimov cracked down on rivals and critics, was the protests in Andijon, a small town in the Ferghana Valley, and their bloody suppression in May 2005 (see Info box 1). A man named Akram Yo'ldoshev played an important role in this context. Yo'ldoshev was a self-taught religious scholar whose widely distributed *Way to Faith*<sup>28</sup> had introduced Muslim spirituality and ethics to a growing number of readers. He was arrested after the 1999 bombings and charged with multiple offences. This culminated in the accusation that he had founded a clandestine association modelled on *Hizb-ut Tahrir*,<sup>29</sup> named after him, which was said to be planning a coup and seeking to establish an Islamic caliphate.<sup>30</sup> Uzbek state propaganda stylised the “Way to Faith” as the manifesto of this organisation, although it remains unclear whether Yo'ldoshev's text was deliberately distorted or simply misunderstood. The point is that the interpretation presented by the regime was also adopted by Western experts and the media and ultimately shaped the interpretation of the events in Andijon as an “Islamist uprising”.<sup>31</sup>

The brutal suppression of the Andijon protests marked a turning point in Uzbekistan's recent history. The West criticised the excessive use of force by the state and the government's refusal to allow an independent investigation.

2008, <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/7899/1271248> (accessed 3 June 2023).

28 *Iymonga Yo'l*, long since removed from the internet by Uzbek censorship.

29 Khalid, *Islam after Communism* (see note 9), 166f. The Islamic “Liberation Party” (*Hizb-ut Tahrir*), which seeks the establishment of a caliphate through non-violent means, has been active in Central Asia since the late 1990s and continues to have numerous supporters, especially in Uzbekistan.

30 Human Rights Watch, “Background Briefing on Akram Yuldashev”, 15 January 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/15/background-briefing-akram-yuldashev> (accessed 3 June 2023).

31 See the critical analysis by Sarah Kendzior, “Inventing Akromiya: The Role of Uzbek Propagandists in the Andijon Massacre”, *Demokratizatsiya* 14, no. 4 (2006): 545–62.

### Info box 1: What happened in Andijon?

The protests in Andijon in May 2005 were triggered by the arrest of a group of successful small businessmen who had based their business on the religious principles formulated by Akram Yo'ldoshev. They were accused of forming an extremist association. In all likelihood, however, the real reason for the arrests was that the businessmen were seen by the local elite as economic competitors, which made their orientation towards Islam even more suspect.<sup>a</sup>

Following the men's imprisonment in the summer of 2004, there were repeated demonstrations involving up to one thousand participants. The numbers swelled during the trial, which began in February 2005. When it ended on 11 May around three thousand people gathered outside the courthouse, and the police attempted to disperse them. This was probably the tipping point when the peaceful protest turned into a riot. The following night, a group of armed men stormed the prison to free the businessmen, who had been sentenced to long prison terms. A number of guards were killed and others were taken hostage. The hostage-takers had two key demands: the release of Yo'ldoshev, who had been imprisoned in a maximum security prison in Tashkent since 1999,<sup>b</sup> and a meeting with the President of the Republic. They wanted Karimov to travel to Andijon in person to see the local grievances for himself.

On the afternoon of 13 May, around ten thousand people gathered in the town's main square. Many of them had travelled from the surrounding area; many had come out of sheer curiosity, fuelled by the rumour that the president was coming. Police and military units fired into the crowd, killing hundreds.<sup>c</sup>

a On this and the events in May: International Crisis Group, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*, Asia Briefing no. 38 (Bishkek and Brussels, 25 May 2005) (online, accessed 3 June 2023); Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley et al.: Berkeley University Press, 2007), 193–98 (note 11 on p. 225f. lists the most important sources).

b He died in custody in 2010 or 2011 (although this was only revealed in 2016): “Akram Yuldashev Is Dead” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 January 2016 (online, accessed 3 June 2023).

c Human Rights Watch, “Bullets Were Falling Like Rain”: *The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005*, June 2005 (vol. 17, no. 5(D)), 16f. (online, accessed 3 June 2023).

The Uzbek government responded by turning its back on the West and prohibiting the United States from using Uzbek military bases. Human rights groups and other foreign NGOs were forced to sus-

pend their activities in Uzbekistan. The government tightened its grip on any opposition. Anyone who expressed convictions that deviated from the “Hanafi” norm — and this could sometimes include external attributes such as clothing or beard — could face imprisonment for “religious extremism”. Thousands, including lawyers for the accused, were imprisoned.<sup>32</sup> In 2006, the US State Department placed Uzbekistan on its list of “Countries of Particular Concern”, putting it on a par with countries like Burma, North Korea and Sudan.

The events in Andijon have still not been addressed in Uzbekistan, allowing the government’s interpretation of the events as an “Islamist coup attempt” to prevail. The authorities trust in the power of forgetting. The interior minister at the time, Zokir Almatov, was forced to retire shortly after the events of 2005, but made a political comeback under President Mirziyoyev. In 2018 he was appointed advisor to the interior minister on police reform.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, the following can be said: The revival and rediscovery of Islam that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union not only inspired the state ideology of Uzbekistan, since independence in 1991. It also gave impetus to the politicisation of Islam, which challenged the legitimacy of the post-communist power elite under President Karimov. The latter responded to the challenge with a dual strategy: the suppression of Islamist actors was accompanied by an energetic but selective integration of Islam into the state education system and an attempt to bring the institutions responsible for training religious personnel under strict state control. Religion, nation and tradition have been successfully fused into an Uzbek identity. As a result, Muslim norms became more important in the everyday lives of Uzbeks, and the authority of those who possessed religious knowledge grew.

But the ‘Ulamā, the organised religious experts who transmitted and administered this knowledge, were compromised by their proximity to the state. At the same time, they had to come to terms with the state’s claim to authority over in religious matters.

The state-supporting clergy faced competition from religious laymen who operated outside the system but were regarded by their clientele as more legitimate mediators of religious knowledge. The state fought them with a ferocity that left a lasting mark and underlined Uzbekistan’s image as one of the most repressive countries in the world.

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch, “*Until the Very End*”: Politically Motivated Imprisonment in Uzbekistan, September 2014, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0914\\_ForUpload\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0914_ForUpload_0.pdf) (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>33</sup> “Zakir Almatov naznachen sovetnikom glavy MVD Uzbekistana” [Zakir Almatov appointed advisor to the Minister of Interior], *FergananeWS*, 27 February 2018, <https://www.fergananeWS.com/news/28616> (accessed 3 June 2023).

# State Policy on Religion since 2016

The political course that the Uzbek leadership is pursuing today under President Mirziyoyev has a central thrust that can be seen in all policy areas:<sup>34</sup> to shed the image of a repressive state, to become more liberal and open, and thus to free the country from the international isolation into which the repressive course of its predecessor Karimov had led it. This objective has affected the way Islam is dealt with from the outset. Numerous restrictions on religious practice were lifted and thousands of Uzbeks whose civil liberties had been restricted on suspicion of sympathising with radical Islamist groups were rehabilitated.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, the religious policy initiatives launched under Mirziyoyev continue the policy of the previous years in essential areas. Religious education in particular has become the most important mediator of state ideology. Even more than in the past, these measures reveal a “secular” approach to Islam. This is also the context in which those innovations in Uzbek religious policy that relate to the representation of Islam in the public sphere and its marketing must be seen.

## Legal framework

The legal provisions governing religious practice and the relationship between state and religion are based on the 1992 Constitution.<sup>36</sup> It provides for the separation of state and religion and emphasises the right of every individual to practise any religion or none

<sup>34</sup> On this, Schmitz, *Uzbekistan's Transformation* (see note 5).

<sup>35</sup> However, around two thousand people imprisoned on “religious grounds” remain in Uzbek prisons: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Uzbekistan's Religious and Political Prisoners* (24 November 2021), 48, [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Uzbekistan%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Uzbekistan%20Report_0.pdf) (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>36</sup> The amended Constitution, which came into force on 1 May 2023, incorporates them virtually unchanged. See *The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan* (see note 4).

(Article 31). It prohibits the state from interfering in the activities of religious organisations (Article 61), but grants it the right to restrict religious freedoms.

The state has made intensive use of this right. The religious field has been increasingly regulated since 1992 through laws and other legal acts.<sup>37</sup> This had two objectives: Firstly, to create the legal basis for repressive measures in the name of preventing extremism, which became relevant from 1998 onwards against the backdrop of the threat posed by jihadist groups such as the IBU. Secondly, the aforementioned educational initiatives (see pp. 9f.) were expanded and anchored. They reflect the state's efforts to impose “Uzbek” Islam and thus assert its authority over the interpretation of religious matters. The legal framework for religious practice and -teaching was tightened through a growing number of decrees.

## Control and propaganda are closely intertwined.

The regulatory momentum has by no means slowed since Mirziyoyev's inauguration at the end of 2016 and the new “openness” of state policy. On the contrary, a glance at legislative activity since 2017 shows that the new openness has been accompanied from the outset by measures to ensure that the new freedoms do not get out of hand. As before, the focus has been on warding off undesirable “non-traditional” religious teachings in the name of “countering extremism” and the institutionalisation and propagandistic dissemination of “correct” “Uzbek” Islam as part of the state ideology. The relevant decrees and regulations create an increasingly dense institutional system of interlocking control mechanisms and propaganda

<sup>37</sup> For a compilation of relevant documents (up to 2018), see Dustin Gamza and Pauline Jones, “The Evolution of Religious Regulation in Central Asia, 1991 – 2018”, *Central Asian Survey* 40, no. 2 (2021): 197 – 221 (208 – 11).

tools. This ensures that the discursive power of the state is also preserved in matters of religion.

The highest religious authority, the state *Committee for Religious Affairs* (CRA), plays a key role. Established in 1992,<sup>38</sup> it remains the central organ of the state's religious policy. Its powers have been successively expanded over the years and new regulations added. The current listing of the tasks, functions and responsibilities of the CRA<sup>39</sup> – the most comprehensive to date with thirteen chapters – is based on a presidential decree from 2018.<sup>40</sup> According to the decree, the CRA's main task is to implement a uniform state policy on religion.<sup>41</sup>

In doing so, the CRA has a wide range of powers. These include de facto supervision of the *Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan* (DMU),<sup>42</sup> the religious organisations (mosques) and the educational institutions. The CRA acts as the supreme propaganda and censorship authority – reviewing curricula and research, prescribing the topics of Friday sermons, authorising the publication of materials and media with religious content, publishing them itself, and organising educational activities that serve to reinforce the secular state. At the level of urban and village neighbourhoods (*mahalla*), its responsibilities overlap with those of law enforcement agencies. In 2017, the competences of the latter were expanded in the name of youth protection, extremism prevention and patriotic education.<sup>43</sup>

The status of the CRA and its central position in all matters relating to religious doctrine and practice is

also reflected in the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations”. Adopted in June 2021, it replaced the Religion Law of 1998,<sup>44</sup> which had been in force until then. The genesis of this new law testifies to the influence of international standards on Uzbek reform policy – and to its limits.

The revision of the Religion Law was triggered by massive international criticism of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. Specifically, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief visited the country in October 2017 and recommended a substantial revision of the 1998 law.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, in January 2019, the Uzbek parliament adopted a roadmap for the implementation of these recommendations, explicitly mentioning a “positive image” for Uzbekistan as a goal.<sup>46</sup> The good intentions were rewarded within the year, when the US State Department removed Uzbekistan from its list of “Countries of Particular Concern” and placed it on the “Special Watchlist” of less serious cases.<sup>47</sup>

In June 2020, in connection with the publication of a new human rights strategy, it was announced that a new law on religion would be introduced. The president instructed the parliament, the cabinet, the CRA and the Ministry of Justice to draft it.<sup>48</sup> By August, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, which provides constitutional expertise on request, had received the draft, which consisted of seven chapters with forty-nine articles. The Commission's report was published two months later. It contains many critical comments and suggestions for improvement.<sup>49</sup>

38 Presidential Decree UP-359 as of 7 March 1992, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/165460>; Ministerial Order no. 159 as of 2 April 1992, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/416039> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

39 Ministerial Order no. 612 as of 30 September 2021, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/5666003>. See also the website of the CRA: <https://religions.uz> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

40 Presidential Decree no. UP-5416 as of 18 April 2018, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/3686283>; complemented by Presidential Order no. PP-3668 as of 18 April 2018, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/3685965> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

41 Ministerial Order no. 612 as of 30 September 2021 (see note 39).

42 They insist that they are not subordinate to the CRA, but equal to it, since both institutions are answerable to the cabinet (talks with representatives of the DMU in Tashkent in May 2022). However, the legal documents contradict this self-perception.

43 See especially Chapter 2 of Presidential Order PP-2896 as of 1 May 2017, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/3175734> (accessed 3 June 2023).

44 Law no. 618-I as of 15 May 1998, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/65089#65280> (accessed 3 June 2023).

45 United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief on His Mission to Uzbekistan* (22 February 2018), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1481445> (accessed 3 June 2023).

46 *Joint Decree of the Legislative Assembly and the Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Uzbekistan on a Roadmap for the Implementation of Proposals and Recommendations in the Field of Religious Freedom*, Document no. 2300-III as of 18 January 2019, <https://lex.uz/docs/4259093> (accessed 3 June 2023).

47 “USCIRF Releases 2020 Annual Report with Recommendations for U.S. Policy,” 28 April 2020, <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscifr-releases-2020-annual-report-recommendations-us-policy> (accessed 3 June 2023).

48 Presidential Decree no. UP-6012 as of 23 June 2020, <https://lex.uz/docs/4872357> (accessed 3 June 2023).

49 European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission)/OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), *Uzbekistan: Joint Opinion*

The strict registration requirements for religious communities or organisations and the qualification of all unregistered religious practices as “illegal”, the restrictions on religious education and the practice of rituals, the restrictions on the production and dissemination of religious media, and the ban on missionary activities are all seen as problematic because they contradict international human rights standards. The fact that the draft law grants only limited autonomy to religious organisations and subjects fundamental elements of religious freedom to state control is criticised, as is the often vague terminology. Terms such as “extremism”, “fundamentalism” and “inter-ethnic harmony” leave state authorities wide scope for interpretation in applying the law, encourage arbitrary decisions and should therefore be removed, the report stated. One fundamental comment relates to the title of the law: the Venice Commission recommends referring to “freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief” in order to include non-religious beliefs.

The Uzbek parliament adopted the revised law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” in June 2021.<sup>50</sup> Its structure and composition have been substantially revised, but in terms of content the law now in force differs little from the first draft; the recommendations of the Venice Commission were largely ignored. Three of the now six chapters, with a total of thirty-five articles, deal with the registration of religious entities, which despite some relaxation still involves complicated bureaucratic requirements (Chapters 3 and 4, Articles 11 – 24). Missionary activity remains prohibited (Chapter 2, Article 7), as does private religious instruction (Chapter 2, Article 8). The study of Islam continues to be permitted only at specially designated state or state-controlled secondary schools, colleges and universities (see p. 15ff.). Where and how religious rituals may be performed is precisely regulated (Chapter 2, Article 9), as is the use of religious symbols and the distribution of religious literature (Chapter 2, Article 10). The ban on the public display of religious affiliation through clothing – in particular the wearing of the hijab – has been

removed, but remains in place de facto in universities and other state institutions where internal regulations apply.

## Religious education and secular ideology

In parallel with the consolidation of state control over religious organisations, from 2017 onwards, the state’s supervision of religious teaching in educational institutions – and of the overall opportunities to learn about Islam – has been tightened. For example, the June 2021 law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” grants everyone the right to receive religious instruction from qualified staff. But there are significant restrictions:

Organised religious pre-school education for children, which was allowed under Karimov, is now no longer provided. Only parents themselves or persons authorised by them are allowed to provide children with basic religious education. Private religious schools for older students are not prohibited in principle, but the new Religion Law makes their establishment (as well as that of other “religious” organisations) difficult to impossible. Religion is not taught as a separate subject at all in public schools. Nevertheless, it is still possible to study Islam more intensively. Obviously, the aim is to meet the strong demand for religious education and at the same time to bring religious education out of the shadows of private, informal circles. The means of choice is the controlled expansion of provision in state and state-controlled institutions.

These educational and research institutions, which are formally under the authority of the clerical administration (the DMU), include ten madrasas, two of which are for women. They offer basic Islamic education in different regions of the country, which is completed in four years and qualifies graduates to work as imams (men only) or as Arabic teachers. Fees vary, but scholarships are available. Admission requirements always include a test of foreign language skills, as well as knowledge of history and the subject “Fundamentals of Spirituality” (*ma’naviyat asoslari*),<sup>51</sup> the successor to the subject *ma’naviyat va ma’rifat* – which has been part of the state school curriculum

on the Draft Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” (Strasbourg and Warsaw, 12 October 2020), [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2020\)002-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2020)002-e) (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>50</sup> Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Liberty of Conscience and Religious Organizations”, Document no. 699, 6 July 2021, <https://lex.uz/docs/6117508> (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>51</sup> Committee for Religious Affairs, *Diniy ta’lim borasida batafsil ma’lumotga egamizmi?* [Detailed information on religious education], 24 June 2021, <https://moturidiy.uz/oz/news/192> (accessed 3 June 2023).

since the 1990s and teaches state ideology in moral terms (see p. 9). In addition, the madrasas offer three- to six-month Arabic courses for paying students.

In addition to these specialised religious secondary schools, three religious colleges offer five-year degree programmes in Islamic studies as well as advanced training for imams and teachers of religion:<sup>52</sup>

- The *Islamic Institute Imam al-Bukhari*<sup>53</sup> in Tashkent, which has been training imams and educating teaching staff since 1971 (and was until recently the only institution to do so) (see Info box 2, p. 17);
- since 2017, the *Mir-i Arab Higher Madrasa*<sup>54</sup> in Bukhara, which bears the same name as the traditional *Mir-i Arab* madrasa; and
- since 2018, the *Institute for Hadith Science*<sup>55</sup> in Samarkand.

All three institutes offer bachelor's and master's degree programmes with a focus on Islamic law (*fiqh*), Koranic exegesis (*tafsir*) and Arabic; applicants must have at least a secondary school diploma. Again, an entrance test requires basic knowledge of Arabic, Uzbek history and Islamic law, and (in Samarkand) knowledge of the Hadith.

### Islamic Studies at the service of state ideology.

Mirziyoyev's decision to establish two new religious universities shortly after taking office may have been intended to appease the clerical establishment of the DMU. Since 2017 he has also initiated the founding of no less than five new state research institutes, which are intended to cultivate the "scientific" approach to Islam promoted under Karimov and place it at the service of state ideology. At first glance,

52 "Qabul 2021 – 2022: Diniy ta'lim muassasalariga kirish imtihonlari qaysi fanlardan bo'ladi?" [Admission 2021 – 2022: Examination Subjects for Admission to Religious Educational Institutions], <https://abt.uz/blog/qabul-2021-2022-diniy-talim-muassasalariga-kirish-imtihonlari-qaysi-fanlardan-boladi> (List of madrasas as of 28 May 21) (accessed 3 June 2023).

53 Website of the Islamic Institute Imam al-Bukhari: <https://oliymahad.uz> (accessed 3 June 2023).

54 Website of the Mir-i Arab Higher Madrasa: <http://www.mirarab.uz/> (accessed 3 June 2023).

55 Ministerial Order no. 896 as of 2 November 2018, <https://lex.uz/docs/4033921>; website of the Institute of Hadith Science: <https://www.muhammadis.uz/> (accessed 3 June 2023). The term hadith (*hadīth*) refers to the recorded words and actions of the Prophet; see Hartmut Bobzin, *Mohammed* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), 25.

this appears to be oriented towards international scientific standards. However, the political-ideological thrust is evident in the relevant legal acts, which make it clear that a very specific Islam is to be taught, for example when it is emphasised that the "purity of our religion" is to be preserved. This aspect is underlined in the founding documents and websites of all institutions that deal with Islam in research and teaching.

Among the new state research institutes, the *Centre of Islamic Civilisation*, which was founded in June 2017, occupies a special position. Unlike the other new institutes for Islamic studies under the auspices of the CRA (see Info box 2, p. 17), it reports directly to the government. It is currently being developed into a leading research and documentation centre that will present the history of Central Asian Islam and its significance for the development of Islamic civilisation to the public. It works closely with other relevant state institutions (libraries, archives, universities) (see also p. 18ff.).<sup>56</sup>

In parallel to the new opportunities for academic study of Islam – whether at the religious schools administered by the DMU or at the newly created secular teaching and research institutions – the concept of "spiritual enlightenment" (*ma'naviyat va ma'rifat*), which was introduced at schools and universities under Karimov as a secular alternative to the teaching of religious values, remains valid (see pp. 9). The *Centre for Spirituality and Enlightenment (ma'naviyat va ma'rifat markazi)*, founded in 1994, has played a leading role in disseminating the concept, working with other governmental and non-governmental institutions and organisations. Under Karimov, the concept was institutionalised through a series of binding legal acts, and *ma'naviyat* became an integral part of the broader educational system, including the mass media.<sup>57</sup>

The term *ma'naviyat* has no clearly defined meaning; the word has only appeared in Uzbek dictionaries since the 1990s.<sup>58</sup> It derives from a term developed in Islamic poetics and theology (*ma'nā*), which refers to the semantic dimension of language and to the inner sources of (divine) knowledge.<sup>59</sup> In the modern

56 Presidential Orders no. PP-3080 as of 23 June 2017, <https://lex.uz/docs/3600690>, and PP-5186 as of 16 July 2021, <https://lex.uz/docs/5514991>; Centre of Islamic Civilisation website: <http://www.cisc.uz> (each accessed 3 June 2023).

57 Maerz, "Ma'naviyat in Uzbekistan" (see note 20), 213.

58 Maerz, "Ma'naviyat in Uzbekistan" (see note 20), 210f.

59 Margaret Larkin, *The Theology of Meaning: 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Theory of Discourse* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1995).

## Info box 2: New state institutes for Islamic Studies under the auspices of the CRA

- The *International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan* (IIAU) in Tashkent emerged in 2017 from the Tashkent Islamic University (TIU), which was founded in 1999. Initially, it was jointly administered by CrA and DMU as a non-governmental organisation.<sup>a</sup> However, it was largely state-funded from the beginning. Today (since April 2021<sup>b</sup>) the CrA has sole responsibility, and the IIAU is officially a state institution. Since 2021 it has been developed into an umbrella organisation for the education and training of imams as well as teaching and other professionals for Islamic universities. The IIAU also trains teachers for the specialised religious secondary schools, which also fall under the responsibility of the DMU. The academy is divided into three faculties<sup>c</sup> offering bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes, a vocational training department with branches in several provinces of the country, and a media centre.
- In February 2017, the *Imom Termizi International Science and Research Centre* was established in Termez.<sup>d</sup> The Hadith collection of Muhammad Ibn 'Isā at-Termidhī (b. 825 CE near Termez) is one of the canonical collections of traditions from the life of the Prophet, along with that of Imam al-Bukhārī (b. 810 CE in Bukhara). Hadith research is consequently a focus of the centre in Termez, which also prepares textbooks and teaching materials.
  - a Presidential Order no. PQ-3433 as of 15 December 2017 (online, accessed 3 June 2023).
  - b Presidential Decree no. UP-6212 as of 22 April 2021 (online, accessed 3 June 2023).
  - c The faculties for Classical Oriental Philologies, Islamic Economics and International Relations and the faculty for Islamic Studies, see website of the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan: <https://iiiau.uz/> (accessed 3 June 2023).
  - d Presidential Order no. PP-2774 as of 15 February 2017 (online, accessed 3 June 2023); Imom Termizi International Science and Research Centre website: <http://termiziy.uz/> (accessed 3 June 2023).
- The *Imom Bukhari International Research Centre* in Samarkand was established in the same year, in July 2017.<sup>e</sup> The institute is dedicated to Hadith research, Koranic study, Islamic law and theology (*kalām*), and the history of Islamic art and culture in Central Asia in general. It awards research grants and organises conferences, exhibitions, academic competitions and other “educational and cultural events”. As with all such institutes, there is an emphasis on internationalisation and international cooperation in the field of Islamic Studies.
  - e Ministerial Order no. 483 as of 19 July 2017 (online, accessed 3 June 2023); Imom Bukhari International Research Centre website: <http://www.bukhari.uz/> (accessed 3 June 2023).
  - f Presidential Order No. PP-4802 as of 12 August 2020 (online, accessed 3 June 2023); al-Maturidi International Research Centre website: <https://moturidiy.uz/en> (accessed 3 June 2023).
  - g Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).
- In August 2020, the *al-Maturidi International Research Centre* was added.<sup>f</sup> In addition to the two research centres mentioned above, this is the third institute to focus specifically on the Central Asian contribution to Islamic cultural and intellectual history. Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (born 893 CE in Samarkand) is regarded as the founder of the *Māturīdīyya*, a branch of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence that developed in Central Asia and had a significant influence on Islamic scholarship in Uzbekistan.<sup>g</sup> The institute is housed in the building of the IIAU, to which it is legally subordinate. It focuses on researching the Maturidi legacy and emphasises its internationalist orientation, which is reflected, among other things, in the presence of teaching staff from abroad.

Uzbek context, the originally epistemological concept becomes a moral doctrine, a catalogue of behavioural norms. *Ma'naviyat* — as the relevant documents show,<sup>60</sup> embodies all the qualities to which Uzbekistan owes its glorious pre-colonial history and successful development since independence. This encompasses the “traditional” values that characterise Uzbekistan and its people (such as “love of one’s country” and “respect” for elders and authorities), which must be

protected from foreign influences and threats, as well as the idea that these values and the collective that embodies them are superior.

### “National” values and “correct” faith are high on Mirziyoyev’s agenda.

The concept remains ubiquitous and is now being promoted under the slogan “enlightenment against ignorance”. President Mirziyoyev has restructured the *Centre for Spirituality and Enlightenment* several times, most recently in 2021, and made the issue a top priority by placing himself at the head of the body that

<sup>60</sup> Most recently: Presidential Order no. PP-5040 as of 26 March 2021, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/5344680> (accessed 3 June 2023).

coordinates the Centre's tasks.<sup>61</sup> In this attempt to institutionalise the secular concept of "enlightenment" established by his predecessor as a counterweight to religious education, the power-political dimension of Mirziyoyev's religious policy is particularly evident:

The committee includes representatives of the relevant departments in the presidential apparatus, virtually the entire government and the heads of all relevant state institutions, including the Agency for Information and Mass Communication, the Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Arts, and the CrA. The importance of the concept for state policy is reflected in this line-up, as is the inter-institutional interlocking necessary for implementation on all levels of society. The aim is a "radical improvement of the system of educational work" in the name of "national progress", as stated in the relevant decree.<sup>62</sup> The latter also includes a roadmap illustrating the various aspects of *ma'naviyat* and discussing how it can be disseminated more effectively.

The Muslim religion is an essential aspect of *ma'naviyat*, but not the only one. Islam is considered a genuine part of the "spiritual heritage of the great ancestors", so "respect" for this religion is one of the basic tenets of *ma'naviyat*. But "respect for other faiths and their philosophies" is also part of the programme, which has been promoted at state universities since April 2021. For example, vice-chancellors for engagement with youth are now also responsible for the spiritual education of students. Numerous activities (conferences, competitions, projects) are aimed at pupils and students and involve educational and cultural institutions at all levels.<sup>63</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the new Islamic Studies institutes that have been established since 2017 also locate their tasks in this context. This is confirmed by their founding documents. The state's grip on research and discourse and its determination of what is "correct" (i.e. worth know-

ing) about Islam extends to curriculum design. The mission of the *Imom Termizi International Science and Research Centre* is to research the spiritual heritage of the ancestors and "make their noble ideas and teachings known to the general public" in the face of growing "ideological attacks", in order to give the youth in particular a "healthy view of the world" and educate them "in the spirit of loyalty to ancient values".<sup>64</sup> The mission of the *Imom Bukhari International Research Centre* is formulated similarly.<sup>65</sup> And the decree on the most recent foundation, the *al-Maturidi International Research Centre*, states that it is based on the idea of "enlightenment against ignorance" and aims to preserve and promote Bukhari's legacy for the "development of faith and knowledge of religious values". On this basis, the young generation is to be educated in the spirit of "spiritual purity, peace and creativity" and their "ideological immunity to harmful influences alien to our spiritual and educational outlook" is to be strengthened.<sup>66</sup> This objective is linked to a catalogue of propagandistic measures aimed at a wider public, such as the organisation of discussion groups and meetings on the "Foundations of a Healthy Faith" or television and radio broadcasts about the "exemplary life and rich scientific and spiritual heritage" of al-Maturidi and other scholars.

## Religion and representation

The educational initiatives are a manifestation of the old state policy goal of imposing a secular Islam and corresponding beliefs and behavioural maxims. The idea is that Uzbekistan's Muslims should identify with this iteration of Islam. But Mirziyoyev's religious initiatives are also demonstratively outward-looking. "Uzbek" Islam should appeal to the *ummah* (the global community of believers) and to the non-Muslim world alike. In this context, architecture and artefacts representing Uzbekistan's Islamic heritage are of paramount importance.

The symbolic and performative dimension of politics<sup>67</sup> is exemplified by the *Centre of Islamic Civili-*

**61** This is the Republican Council for Spirituality and Enlightenment. It has authority over the Centre for Spirituality and Enlightenment (with subdivisions at various administrative levels) and the subordinate councils within ministries, committees and universities at the national and local levels. See Presidential Order no. PP-5040 as of 26 March 2021 (see note 60).

**62** Presidential Order no. PP-5040 as of 26 March 2021 (see note 60).

**63** Presidential Order no. PP-5040 as of 26 March 2021 (Roadmap) (see note 60).

**64** Presidential Order no. PP-2774 as of 15 February 2017, <https://lex.uz/docs/3113650> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**65** Ministerial Order no. 483 as of 19 July 2017, <https://lex.uz/docs/3263382> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**66** Presidential Order no. PP-4802 as of 12 August 2020, <https://lex.uz/docs/4945429> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**67** On the importance of the symbolic for political representation see Paula Diehl, "Repräsentation im Spannungsfeld

sation founded in 2017 (see p. 16f.). The name says it all: the centre is intended to present Uzbekistan as a historical nucleus of Islamic culture, to show the world the achievements of Central Asian Islamic art and science, and to illustrate their contribution to the development of human civilisation. The Centre's mission as described in its founding document<sup>68</sup> conveys a genuinely "secular" view of Islam. As with the educational decrees and regulations, religion is appropriated by the European and entirely profane concept of "Enlightenment".

When the Centre's legal documents state that the famous scholars of the heyday of Central Asian Islamic culture always remained committed to "the principles of science, humanism and enlightenment", this almost reads like an apology for a possibly religiously motivated quest for knowledge. The concept of the transcendent as the measure of knowledge is obviously far removed from the image that Uzbekistan's secular elite has of the famous scholars of earlier eras.<sup>69</sup> In that form of Islam, the Muslim religion is first and foremost a cultural form of expression that is manifested in the sciences and arts and is committed to humanist ideals.<sup>70</sup>

### **Uzbekistan's "third renaissance" is based on the idea of a tolerant, "secular" Islam.**

This view is particularly evident in the adoption of the term "renaissance", which has recently been introduced by the relevant legal acts for the epochal division of Uzbek history: After a "first renaissance", which roughly encompasses the period of scientific discoveries in the ninth to twelfth centuries, and a "second renaissance" associated with the Timurids

(fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), a "third renaissance" has dawned with the inauguration of President Mirziyoyev. The latter is reflected in the mission of the *Centre of Islamic Civilisation*. According to a decree of 2021, which defines its tasks,<sup>71</sup> the Centre is to promote "enlightenment" in the service of Uzbekistan's "third renaissance". The ideal of a noble and sublime Islam, committed to scientific knowledge and progress, plays a key role.

In order to present this Islam and the associated idea of a "third renaissance", a new museum of impressive dimensions is currently being built at the *Hazrati Imom*,<sup>72</sup> which is an ensemble of Islamic religious buildings and museums in Tashkent, in the style of Timurid architecture.<sup>73</sup> The Centre of Islamic Civilisation will bring together existing collections of Islamic art and science from all over Central Asia and present them using the most modern techniques. The collection, comprising some 100,000 exhibits, is to include precious manuscripts and copies of the Koran as well as archaeological finds and everyday objects from various periods. There will also be space for archival research and restoration of manuscripts and other antiquities.

Great importance is attached to prestigious international cooperation, for example with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ICESCO), as well as other Islamic organisations and institutes. The Tashkent project is financed from the state budget, alongside grants from foreign financial institutions and other donors, and donations to a dedicated fund for the development of the Centre of Islamic Civilisation.<sup>74</sup> A similarly prestigious architectural en-

von Symbolizität, Performativität und politischem Imaginären", in *Politische Repräsentation und das Symbolische: Historische, politische und soziologische Perspektiven*, ed. Paula Diehl and Felix Steilen (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015), 7–22.

<sup>68</sup> Presidential Order no. PP-3080 as of 23 June 2017 (see note 56).

<sup>69</sup> Discussions in May 2022 confirmed this. For example, the deputy director of the Centre of Islamic Civilisation told the author that research on Islam should show its "humanistic" values. "Scientists, not religious scholars, work at the Centre. We do not interfere in questions of religion, we are on the secular side."

<sup>70</sup> Terms such as "purity", "light", "goodness", "friendship", "humanism" appear frequently in legal documents in association with the Muslim religion.

<sup>71</sup> Presidential Order no. PP-5186 as of 16 July 2021 (see note 56); see especially the "Roadmap for Researching the Scientific Heritage of the Ancestors Who Contributed to the Development of Global Science and Civilisation and Propagating the Achievements of the New Era" (Annex 1 of the Decree).

<sup>72</sup> This "holy imam" is the patron saint of the city of Tashkent, Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Kaffal as-Shashi (born 903/904 CE); his sixteenth-century mausoleum is one of the oldest buildings on the site, which also houses the *Imam al-Bukhari Institute* and the DMU.

<sup>73</sup> Centre of Islamic Civilisation website: <http://www.cisc.uz> (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>74</sup> Presidential Order no. PP-5186 as of 16 July 2021 (see note 56). No information is available on the origins and volume of foreign funding for the promotion of Islamic

semble was created in Samarkand, in the guise of the *Imom Bukhari International Research Centre*, with the *Institute for Hadith Science* attached in 2018.<sup>75</sup> Developments such as these underline the will to place Islamic education and scholarship at the service of the state. The *Centre of Islamic Civilisation* will also be involved in the education and training of teachers for the country's Islamic higher education institutions and in the training of tourist guides, especially for the booming pilgrimage tourism sector.

President Karimov had already promoted pilgrimage tourism as a way of steering peoples' religious needs in a safe and at the same time economically beneficial direction. Pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) to holy places (mostly the tombs of saints or the places where important historical personalities lived) has always played an important role in Central Asian Islam. Despised as superstition by the Soviet elite and viewed with suspicion by universalist religious scholars,<sup>76</sup> pilgrimage revived in the 1990s in the course of renewed interest in Islam.

Since the turn of the millennium, a thriving pilgrimage industry has emerged in Uzbekistan, generating revenue for the state and the private sector and becoming a growth industry.<sup>77</sup> Numerous pilgrimage sites – many of which were originally just a tomb or mausoleum with an adjoining prayer house and small cemetery – have been restored and expanded into extensive complexes or completely redesigned. The commercialisation of the pilgrimage sites was accompanied by their aesthetic standardisation.<sup>78</sup>

culture and education. However, contacts between Uzbekistan and the Islamic world have intensified since 2016, suggesting significant donations from other Muslim countries, particularly the Gulf States and Turkey.

**75** “Hadis ilmi maktabi faoliyati haqida” [Activities of the School of Hadith Science], *YouTube*, 13 August 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_09nrSZYLWI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_09nrSZYLWI); “Imom Buxoriy xalqaro ilmiy-tadqiqot markaz” [Imom Bukhari International Research Centre], *YouTube*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4ylQb2LsZM> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

**76** Schmitz, *Islam in Tajikistan* (see note 7), 9.

**77** David M. Abramson and Elyor E. Karimov, “Sacred Sites, Profane Ideologies: Religious Pilgrimage and the Uzbek State”, in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, ed. Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 319–38.

**78** Because restorations are mostly oriented on the monumental style of the Timurid period, pilgrimage sites of completely different types today look astonishingly similar.

The ritual acts customary in the vicinity of sacred sites were also standardised and magical practices, especially mantics and the production and sale of apotropaic charms, were discouraged. On the other hand, there are now souvenir shops at all the major pilgrimage sites offering more or less identical products, giving the impression of a thorough secularisation of pilgrimage in the service of tourism.

Pilgrimage tourism received a huge boost after President Mirziyoyev took office. Initially, the focus was on measures that would enable the rapid development of the country's tourism potential (particularly by easing the visa regime and developing tourism infrastructure).<sup>79</sup> Since 2018, pilgrimage tourism has received increased attention as a sector in its own right. The main target group is visitors from Muslim countries, who also perform rites at holy sites and attach importance to observing dietary regulations.<sup>80</sup> The reform of the *Organisation of Turkic States* (OTS) at the Istanbul Summit in 2021<sup>81</sup> and the Strategic Partnership Agreement between Uzbekistan and Turkey<sup>82</sup> have brought travellers from Turkic-speaking countries into focus as a target group for pilgrimages.

Within the framework of cooperation with the OTS, a July 2022 decree calls for the development of the “Blessed Pilgrimage” concept, which will primarily target pilgrims from OTS countries. The plan is to develop new pilgrimage routes and organise seminars, conferences and festivals to promote the new destinations, with the involvement of universities.<sup>83</sup> The “Blessed Pilgrimage” concept is not only

**79** Presidential Decree no. DP-4861 as of 12 December 2016, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/4612734> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**80** Presidential Decree no. UP-5416 as of 18 April 2018 (see note 40).

**81** Mehmet Sah Yilmaz, “Turkic Council's Name Changed to Organization of Turkic States”, *Anadolu Agency*, 13 November 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkic-council-name-changed-to-organization-of-turkic-states/2419633> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**82** Michaël Tanchum, “New Turkey-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Accelerates Turkey's Rise as a Eurasian Agenda-Setter”, *The Turkey Analyst*, 8 June 2022, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/688-new-turkey-uzbekistan-strategic-partnership-accelerates-turkey%E2%80%99s-rise-as-a-eurasian-agenda-setter.html> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**83** The IIAU, for example, offers courses on pilgrimage tourism. See IIAU, “Pilgrimage Tourism Master Classes Have Started”, 30 October 2021, <https://iiau.uz/en/news/916> (accessed 3 June 2023).

intended to create jobs for Uzbek entrepreneurs. It also aims to promote “cultural rapprochement” between young people from the Turkic-speaking world, raising awareness of the importance of shared values such as “respect for national traditions and ancestors”.<sup>84</sup>

This approach is new in that the promotion of pilgrimage tourism is no longer linked solely to economic objectives, but also used as an instrument of cultural policy, i.e. in a representative function. In this way, national, even confessional differences are defused and commonalities are emphasised (mainly with the Turkish world). The distinction between the sacred and the secular itself becomes obsolete in the bureaucratic appropriation of religious practice, for example when the “saints” whose shrines believers visit on pilgrimages become “thinkers” in administrative prose.<sup>85</sup> This choice of words presumably also accommodates the universalist dogma of the ‘Ulamā, which has emancipated itself from “saints” and “superstitious” practices associated with them. But the co-opting of religion by the state has consequences that may not please all representatives of the clergy, especially the stricter among them. For in the embrace of the secular state, Islam itself becomes a “civil” religion invoking universal values that are essentially devoid of a religious foundation.

As the state co-opts religious education and integrates religious content and ritual into the secular programme of “spiritual enlightenment”, Islam becomes a representative form of culture. As such, it is purged of anything that might spoil the ideal of a noble, civic-minded Islam committed to universal values: missionising, politicising, militancy. At the same time, the state possesses growing scope to define what religion should and should not do. This is exemplified by the relevant legal documents, which prescribe in detail the measures by which secularisation is to be implemented.

Against this background, the following questions arise: What influence do the legal and educational policy guidelines have on the practice of believers? Does it reflect the secularisation of the religious, which is the aim of the policy measures? And what is the role of Muslim authorities and preachers in re-defining the relationship between religion and secularity?

<sup>84</sup> Presidential Order no. PP-338 as of 30 July 2022, <https://lex.uz/docs/6137071> (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

# Religion and Society

## Liberalisation and Islamisation

The liberalisation of religious policy that accompanied the change of government in 2016 has noticeably increased the presence of Islam in the public sphere.<sup>86</sup> Since November 2017, the call to prayer (*azan*) has again been amplified by loudspeakers<sup>87</sup> and can be heard from afar. The mosques — of which there were just over 2,100 at the end of 2022 — are well attended for Friday prayers; many worshippers, including many young men,<sup>88</sup> also pray there at other times. The mosques have increasingly returned to their original function as a place for informal gatherings, while at the same time acting as a link between the community and the state-controlled clerical administration, the DMU. In general, the range of Muslim civil society organisations<sup>89</sup> has become broader and more diverse. In addition to mosques, these include *mahallas*, which are traditional institutions of

local self-government that serve as an interface between the state and society.<sup>90</sup>

Mahallas are clearly delineated local administrative units (neighbourhoods). Each has its own mosque and is administered by a mahalla committee. Mahallas have always been dedicated to charitable tasks, helping the population cope with everyday life and organising community activities. Since 2016, this has become even more true as economic liberalisation has led to growing socio-economic disparities. The consequences of this — falling living standards and rising poverty — are addressed by the mahallas through the provision of basic services.<sup>91</sup> These include dispute resolution and mediation, often conducted by religious leaders, who also offer their services at circumcisions and wedding ceremonies, as well as at funerals, for example reciting Koranic surahs. They are selected by the mahalla committees and undergo regular qualification tests by the DMU. Their services are in great demand, especially as they now enjoy the approval of the state authorities. The fact that they are supervised is not perceived as problematic, and in many cases is seen as positive.

The *waqf foundation*, a traditional institution of Islamic law that was revived by decree in 2018 and is attached to the DMU, has become very important. Its role is to promote religious education and its institutions, contribute to their maintenance and finance the staff working there.<sup>92</sup> This is done through the alms tax (*zakāt*), which Islam requires of all Muslims whose assets exceed a certain minimum, and through other donations. The foundation regularly reports on the amount and use of these funds on its website. As well as funding the maintenance of mosques and pil-

**86** Unless otherwise stated, the following is based on the author's observations and conversations in Tashkent and the Ferghana Valley (2019 and 2022), as well as structured interviews with a focus group (predominantly members of a mahalla in Ferghana City) conducted on the author's behalf in spring 2021. I would like to thank R. A., who wishes to remain anonymous, for his support.

**87** This had been abolished after the events in Andijon in 2005 (see 11f.). In October 2017, the Department of Religious Affairs (the DMU) prevailed on the state authorities to reintroduce amplification of the *azan*, but not to allow women to wear the hijab in schools or to include religious education in the curricula. See "Uzbekistan Allows Call to Prayer on Loudspeakers", *EurasiaNet*, 7 November 2017, <https://eurasia.net/uzbekistan-allows-call-to-prayer-on-loudspeakers> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**88** Women do not generally pray in mosques in Central Asia.

**89** On the concept and typology see Sebastien Peyrouse and Emil Nasritdinov, *Engaging with Muslim Civil Society in Central Asia: Components, Approaches, and Opportunities*, Peaceworks no. 181 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, December 2021).

**90** Rustamjon Urinboyev and Sherzod Eraliev, "Informal Civil Society Initiatives in Non-Western Societies: Mahallas in Uzbekistan", *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 3 (2022): 477–97.

**91** *Ibid.*, 481.

**92** Presidential Decree no. UP-5416 as of 18 April 2018 (see note 40).

grimage sites, the money is also used for charitable projects, such as helping the needy or planting trees.<sup>93</sup>

### The new religious freedoms are widely used.

Apart from that, various non-governmental organisations and informal groups have sprung up to help the needy and often do this much more efficiently than the state institutions.<sup>94</sup> The members of these communities see it as a religious duty to provide charitable services and help their compatriots, thus fulfilling the precepts of Muslim ethics and contributing to social cohesion. Because of their religious character, these grassroots organisations play a significant role in spreading Muslim beliefs and practices among the population. Due to their importance for social welfare, they are tolerated by the state – and of course closely monitored.

With the liberalisation of religious activity, Islam has also become more directly visible in the public sphere. The most obvious is probably the growing number of women who wear the hijab, or at least cover their heads and shoulders. In most cases, this seems to be done voluntarily, as the new social norm also stands for modernity and fashionable elegance. For many women, especially those with a religious family background, the hijab is also a gain in freedom: it allows them to escape the daily routine of being a housewife and go out unaccompanied, for example to attend an Arabic course.

In schools, universities and other state institutions, this form of veiling is prohibited by law,<sup>95</sup> but the reality often looks different. Greater religious freedom also means greater leeway in the application of the law. Teachers therefore often refrain from intervening when schoolgirls wear hijab – especially when the majority of parents want them to. The same applies to private religious instruction: although it is prohibited by law, it is still practised, and the authorities do not always intervene.

The new possibilities for religious expression are welcomed by the majority. They are seen as a clear sign that the president is serious about the new free-

doms. Respondents<sup>96</sup> cited as examples the possibility of attending a mosque without fear of reprisals and discussing religious issues in public without fear of being blacklisted or even imprisoned, as was previously the case. Another positive aspect that was mentioned was that people now have a wide range of sources from which to learn about Islam. These include state television, with its channel *Hidoyat sari* (“On the Right Path”)<sup>97</sup>, and above all the internet, with an abundance of religious websites, channels and forums on various platforms and social media. Friday prayers, which is also attended by those who describe themselves as “less religious” and simply want to be kept up to date, provides regular information on the latest government directives, rules and regulations.

Religious knowledge and knowledge of Arabic are highly valued, especially among younger people. Those who learn Arabic often do so with the aim of learning to recite the Koran. Although the internet offers opportunities for this, some still prefer lessons from a spiritual teacher (*ustoz*) or an imam – although this is forbidden by law. For those who are primarily interested in the language there are many private institutes to choose from.

The result of all these innovations is that religious knowledge has become a coveted symbolic resource. Those who can provide information on religious matters enjoy respect and social status. Muslim values and norms function more than ever as a guide for community life and as a point of reference for communal activities in everyday mahalla life. According to one interviewee, Islam is the key to a better world because it brings people together, teaches collective spirit and creates social peace. All respondents, including those who characterized themselves as “less religious”, felt that religious education for children was essential. The majority supported the introduction of religious education in schools, but argued that it should be taught by secular teachers rather than imams.

The Islamisation that goes hand in hand with the new religious freedoms, and which many Uzbeks obviously welcome, is not met with approval in all quarters. According to a few (male) interviewees who spoke out against religious education in schools, too

<sup>93</sup> An overview can be found on the website of the *waqf foundation*: <https://vaqf.uz> (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>94</sup> Peyrouse and Nasritdinov, *Engaging with Muslim Civil Society* (see note 89), 17.

<sup>95</sup> Ministerial Order no. 666 as of 16 August 2018, Annex 2, chap. 3/7, <http://lex.uz/docs/3866498> (accessed 3 June 2023).

<sup>96</sup> See note 86.

<sup>97</sup> Website of the Uzbek state television channel *Hidoyat sari*: <https://www.uztv.tv/channels/hidoyat-sari> (accessed 7 March 2023).

much emphasis is placed on religious issues. They were in favour of “the state paying attention” because much of what was taught from a religious point of view was “conservative and narrow-minded”. The growing importance of Muslim norms of behaviour as a measure of individual and social action is perceived by those who are more distanced from religion as moral pressure and a lack of tolerance for those who think differently. But such positions seem to be in the minority. The state’s efforts to secularise religious education appear largely irrelevant to large sections of society.

The concept of “spiritual education” also seems to neglect the needs of society. An advisor to the minister of justice was quite explicit in this regard: this form of teaching values is completely ineffective, even counterproductive, she said, and the money invested in the *Centre for Spirituality and Enlightenment* and its nationwide branches should therefore be cut.<sup>98</sup>

## Religious authorities

With the new religious freedoms, the range of Muslim authorities has also expanded. As before, the formal hierarchy is headed by the quasi-governmental ‘Ulamā, which is organised in the DMU and, as the highest religious body, only appears in public when the mufti (since October 2021 Nuriddin Kholiknazarov) makes statements on fundamental issues. As a rule, these statements are also posted on the internet and are accessible via the DMU’s website [muslim.uz](https://muslim.uz) or via the DMU’s video posts on YouTube.<sup>99</sup> Apart from that, the content of the DMU website is diverse; reports on the activities of the DMU and the religious educational institutions can be found, as well as particularly beautiful recitations (*tajwīd*) from the Koran and lectures by respected clerics.

Systematically prepared information on Islam is offered by the long-established website [islom.uz](https://islom.uz) and the associated YouTube site.<sup>100</sup> The website was founded in 2003 by Uzbekistan’s probably best-

known contemporary theologian and jurist, the former mufti Sheikh Mohammad Sodyq Mohammad Yusuf (see p. 9), and has continued since his death in 2015. The website [muslimaat.uz](https://muslimaat.uz), run by his daughter Odinakhon Mohammad Sodyq, is aimed specifically at Muslim women.<sup>101</sup> She also runs the Half Moon Publishing House (*Hilol Nashr*), founded by her father, which publishes his works. His Koranic exegesis (*Tafsiri Hilol*) in Uzbek, considered a classic, is also available as an e-book and audio book.<sup>102</sup>

The other pole in the spectrum of Muslim authorities is formed by the imams of the mosques, who, in addition to their genuinely pastoral duties, exercise administrative functions, pass on the guidelines of state religious policy directly to the community and help to ensure that they are observed. Many still work mainly or exclusively in direct contact with their immediate community. But the popularity of social media and the high value placed on Muslim authority have given rise to a new type of preacher who systematically uses the internet and maintains his own digital news channels. With around 100,000 subscribers on Telegram and around half a million on YouTube, preachers such as Abror Mukhtor Ali<sup>103</sup> and others<sup>104</sup> have achieved nationwide prominence. Public intellectuals and bloggers from the secular spectrum lag far behind. Only the popular politician Rasul Kuserbayev, a member of parliament until December 2022,<sup>105</sup> can compete with the prominent preachers, with 78,900 subscribers to his Telegram channel and

**101** Website for Muslimas run by Odinakhon Mohammad Sodyq: <https://muslimaat.uz> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**102** Website of the Half Moon Publishing House (*Hilol Nashr*): <https://e-hilolnashr.uz> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**103** Telegram and YouTube channel of Abror Mukhtor Ali: <https://t.me/AbrorMuxtorAliy> (accessed 3 June 2023); <https://www.youtube.com/@ABRORMUXTORALIYRASMIY> (accessed via <https://www.youtube.com> on 3 June 2023).

**104** For example, Shukurulloh domla, whose Telegram channel (inactive since February 2023) had around 60,000 subscribers ([https://t.me/islom\\_yulduzi](https://t.me/islom_yulduzi)); his YouTube channel (now closed) had well over 400,000 subscribers.

**105** Since 2014, Rasul Kuserbayev has been a member of parliament for the Liberal Democratic Party (UzLiDeP), to which President Mirziyoyev also belongs and which forms the majority in parliament with 43 (of 128) seats. After his surprise retirement from parliament, Kuserbayev moved to the Ministry of Natural Resources as an advisor in February 2023; see the Wikipedia entry on Kuserbayev: [https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rasul\\_Kuserbayev](https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rasul_Kuserbayev) (accessed 3 June 2023).

**98** Telegram post by Shahnoza Soatova, 17 February 2023, <https://t.me/s/shahnozxon> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**99** DMU website and YouTube channels: <https://old.muslim.uz>; <https://www.youtube.com/@Muslimuzz> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

**100** Website founded by Mohammad Sodyq Mohammad Yusuf: <https://islom.uz/>; YouTube channels of [islom.uz](https://islom.uz/): <https://www.youtube.com/@islomuz/channels> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

150,000 YouTube subscribers.<sup>106</sup> Conversely, the television channel of religious entrepreneur Mubashshir Ahmad, *Azon TV*, has 1.19 million subscribers<sup>107</sup> and can thus compete with the state TV and radio company, whose YouTube service has 1.53 million subscribers.<sup>108</sup> Finally, the DMU has 357,000 subscribers on YouTube, twice as many as President Mirziyoyev's press service.<sup>109</sup>

Internet and religious channels, or the actors using them, thus contribute significantly to the dissemination and popularisation of religious knowledge. The number of interested lay people who are receptive to authoritative teachings is constantly growing. In the discussion forums of popular websites, these teachings are passed on and shape the attitudes and value judgements of many users.

The professional religious bloggers all have an Islamic educational background, which they refer to in their online profiles. Most of them have graduated from the Tashkent *Imam al-Bukhari Institute*, have experience as imams of Friday mosques, or have a scholarly connection to Islam or a sub-discipline of Islamic studies, as evidenced by editorial or journalistic work, teaching positions at an Uzbek religious university or a leading position in the DMU. Two of the country's best-known bloggers also have journalistic experience: Abror Mukhtor Ali studied journalism, while Mubashshir Ahmad is a religious media entrepreneur.

On their online channels, the preachers cover a wide range of topics that are related to Islam or seem relevant from an Islamic perspective. In addition to interpreting and commenting on verses from the Koran, quotes and aphorisms from Muslim scholars and statements on selected issues of Islam and Muslim ethics, they also offer information in the popular "question and answer" format. Here, users have the opportunity to ask the online imam questions about

concrete, everyday problems, which are often answered in live posts.

The preachers' lectures and commentaries are not limited to religious issues. Similar to bloggers who are not religiously committed and adopt a more secular perspective, online preachers take a stand on current affairs and comment on social and political and even world events. For example, bloggers such as Mubashshir Ahmad warn Uzbek Muslims against Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine,<sup>110</sup> subtly criticise state censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression,<sup>111</sup> but also warn their compatriots against political activism.<sup>112</sup> The state's religious policy and the DMU as its extension are also criticised – for example, when it calls on imams to avoid controversial topics in their sermons. On the contrary, the online imams argue, it is their duty to defend religious injunctions against the secular state.<sup>113</sup>

### Some religious activists are protected, others are prosecuted.

This new form of religious activism has fuelled and polarised the media debate in Uzbekistan. In particular, the positions of Abror Mukhtor Ali have repeatedly sparked controversy. His statements justifying domestic violence against women,<sup>114</sup> stigmatising homosexuality as amoral and unnatural<sup>115</sup> and denouncing

**106** Telegram and YouTube channel of Rasul Kusherbayev: [https://t.me/s/r\\_kusherbayev](https://t.me/s/r_kusherbayev); <https://www.youtube.com/@rasul.kusherbayev> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

**107** YouTube channels of Mubashshir Ahmad: <https://www.youtube.com/@MubashshirAhmad/channels> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**108** YouTube channels of the state TV and radio company: <https://www.youtube.com/@uzmtrk> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**109** YouTube channels of the DMU and President Mirziyoyev's press service: <https://www.youtube.com/@Muslimuzz>; <https://www.youtube.com/@PrezidentMatbuotxizmati> (both accessed 3 June 2023).

**110** Telegram posts by Mubashshir Ahmad, 25 January 2023, 28 February 2023 and passim, <https://t.me/s/MubashshirAhmad> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**111** Telegram post by Mubashshir Ahmad, 12 May 2022, <https://t.me/s/MubashshirAhmad> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**112** Telegram post by Mubashshir Ahmad, 25 August 2022, <https://t.me/s/MubashshirAhmad> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**113** Mubashshir Ahmad argues that the separation of state and religion and the freedom of religion enshrined in law prohibit the state from interfering in intra-religious Muslim debates: Telegram post by Mubashshir Ahmad, 8 February 2022, <https://t.me/s/MubashshirAhmad> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**114** "104 FM To'lqini Yoshlar radiosida jonli muloqot" [Live talk on youth radio on 104 FM], *YouTube*, 23 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40Mp4H-nW7U&t=1166s> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**115** For example in an interview with a news portal: "Besozqolbozlik talabi ortida siyosiy maqsadlar turibdi": Abror Muxtor Aliy bilan LGBT haqida ochiq suhbat" ["There are political goals behind the demand for legalisation of homosexuality": A frank conversation about LGBT with Abror Mukhtor Aliy], *Qalampir.uz*, 24 March 2021, <https://qalampir.uz/uz/news/besok-olbozlik-talabi-ortida-siyosiy-mak>

his critics as foreign agents<sup>116</sup> have attracted widespread support.<sup>117</sup> However, Mukhtor Ali has been heavily criticised by the secular community, and the *Centre of Islamic Civilisation*, where he worked as head of public relations, felt compelled to issue a public apology for his misogynist statements.<sup>118</sup> But at the same time they came to his defence, and not long afterwards the DMU made him deputy head of a newly created department for Koran recitation.<sup>119</sup> Mukhtor Ali continued his online lectures and consultations without any apparent change in his positions. Their aggressive dissemination has played a decisive role in the growing popularity of Islamist attitudes in society.<sup>120</sup>

Not all religious activists, however, have the privilege of being able to express their views so freely. But the red lines are not clearly drawn. Repression is directed at a wide variety of actors who only have in common that they deal with religious issues in a way that deviates from the social norm, so that they are targeted by law enforcement. This could be the publication of a video about food additives that are forbidden (*haram*) for Muslims, the promotion of the wearing of a full body covering (*burqa*) or sharing writings that are classified as illegal<sup>121</sup> or even just

suspicious. Often the mere possession of files with illicit or dubious content is enough to be convicted of “extremist attitudes”. Even those suspected of having contacts with proscribed groups<sup>122</sup> may face severe sanctions.<sup>123</sup> Penalties range from fines and brief detention to lengthy prison sentences. There are repeated reports of serious ill-treatment in detention.<sup>124</sup>

## Religion and secularism

The new religious freedoms appear to be welcomed by a majority of Uzbeks.<sup>125</sup> There is a broad consensus that Islam is a key source of identity that “unites and moves society forward”.<sup>126</sup> Most people do not want an Islamic state, but the influence of actors who want to strengthen Islamic norms and challenge secular principles is growing. Critical voices warn of the consequences of a growing Islamisation. For the most part, they represent the secular, urban segment of

sadlar-turibdi-abror-mukhtoy-aliy-bilan-lgbt-%D2%B3ak-ida-ochik-su%D2%B3bat-35574 (accessed 3 June 2023).

**116** “Makarenko vs. Mukhtor Ali: Istorija s prodolzheniem” [Makarenko vs. Mukhtor Ali: A Continuation Story], *Legal-clinic.uz*, 9 December 2022, <https://legalclinic.uz/tpost/6ee4vy3af1-makarenko-vs-muhtor-ali-istoriya-s-prodo> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**117** See the comments on his YouTube videos (see note 103). Observers on the ground also state that Mukhtor Ali’s opinions are extremely popular.

**118** Press Service of the Centre of Islamic Civilisation, “Khabar” [news], 14 April 2021, <http://www.cisc.uz/habar-XaBaR-280> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**119** “Abror Mukhtor Alij mas’ul vasifaga tajinlandi” [Abror Mukhtor Ali has been given a position of responsibility], *Khabar.uz*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.xabar.uz/jamiyat/abror-muxtor-aliy-masul-vazifaga-tayinlandi> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**120** Andrea Schmitz, *Central Asia’s Muslims and the Taliban*, SWP Comment 17/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2022), 3, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/central-asias-muslims-and-the-taliban> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**121** The list of banned materials was updated in May 2023: “Opublikovan obnovlennyj spisok internet-materialov, priznannyh v Uzbekistane ekstremistskimi” [List of internet material published that is considered extremist in Uzbeki-

stan], *Gazeta.uz*, 19 May 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/05/19/list/> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**122** See the list of these organisations in United States Department of State, *Uzbekistan 2021* (see note 1), 13.

**123** For a compilation of recent examples of criminalisation of even minor offences and restrictions on freedom based on suspicion alone, see Human Rights Watch, “Uzbekistan: Backsliding on Religious Freedom Promises”, 24 May 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/24/uzbekistan-backsliding-religious-freedom-promises> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**124** Ibid. See also United States Department of State, *Uzbekistan 2021* (see note 1), 8–12, as well as the continuously updated website of the human rights organisation Forum 18, which promotes freedom of conscience and belief: <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**125** This presumed “majority” cannot be substantiated with figures. To the author’s knowledge, there are no representative quantitative surveys on the attitudes of the population towards Islam, such as opinion polls.

**126** Thus Kamoliddin Rabbimov, one of the most prominent public intellectuals of the secular field, in a Facebook entry as of 3 January 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/rabbimov.kamoliddin/> (accessed 3 June 2023). Alisher Qodirov, the leader of the right-wing conservative National Revival Democratic Party Milliy Tiklanish, expressed similar views in a talk session: “Tarbiya oiladan boshlanishi kerak” [Education should start in the family], *Azon.uz*, 24 January 2022, <https://azon.uz/content/views/alisher-qodirov-tarbiya-oiladan-boshlani> (accessed 3 June 2023).

society, which is close to state institutions and has a secular educational tradition.

The Ministry of Justice issued a public statement in September 2021 referring to the freedom of belief and conscience enshrined in the 1992 Constitution (Article 31). The ministry stresses that citizens are free to join any religious community – or to renounce any religious affiliation. Imposing one’s own moral or religious beliefs on others also violates the right to inviolability of the person enshrined in Articles 25 and 27, and contradicts the secular constitution.<sup>127</sup> The intervention was prompted by a series of public statements by religious actors calling for restrictions on women’s rights (such as the freedom to choose a profession or the right to drive a vehicle). The Ministry of Justice also found it unacceptable that such actors sought to extend the censorship of religious literature to reproductions of secular works of art, which they considered to be incompatible with Islam.<sup>128</sup>

In February 2022, the minister of justice also spoke out personally. In his annual report he warned religious actors against dividing society by branding those who ignore the rules of Muslim behaviour as infidels. The country’s constitution, he said, allowed citizens to “decide for themselves whether they want to go to hell or not”.<sup>129</sup> Other representatives of state

institutions also criticised the spread of religious intolerance on the internet. For example, the director of the *Centre of Islamic Civilisation* made a public statement against efforts to turn Uzbekistan into an Islamic state.<sup>130</sup> Bahtiyor Babadjanov, a prominent Orientalist and Islamic scholar, complained that “propagandists” of an extremely conservative character had taken over public discourse. The *International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan* produces thousands of graduates every year, he said, but these are not professionals, they are apologists of Islam.<sup>131</sup>

### Islamisation is tolerated by the state.

There are probably good reasons why the state allows these “propagandists” to operate: On the one hand, they have many followers. Alienating them carries the risk of history repeating itself with renewed confrontation between religious milieus and the secular state – as happened in the early 1990s and in Andijon in 2005 (see pp. 11f.). The systematic use of violence against religiously motivated actors would severely damage Uzbekistan’s image as a liberal, reformist state, which the state leadership is trying so hard to project. On the other hand, the prominent online preachers are quite useful. Their public interaction with followers allows the authorities to monitor the social mood, to steer the conversation, or at least keep an eye on them. They can also be used to keep critics of state policy in check. Authorities like Mukhtor Ali can easily discredit targeted

**127** “Prinuditel’noe nasazhdenie religioznych vzgljadov ne dopuskaetsja’ – Minjust” [“Imposing religious beliefs is inadmissible” – The Ministry of Justice], *Gazeta.uz*, 7 September 2021, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/07/minjust/> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**128** This is what happened during an inspection of bookshops by the rector of the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, from the CRA, and other religious representatives including the preacher Mukhtor Ali, in June 2021: “Shukurulloh domla bilan Toshkentda birga” [With Shukurulloh domla in Tashkent], *YouTube*, 27 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MZbeMrDIks> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**129** “Nedopustimo ocenivat’ obshchestvo sobstvennymi religioznymi vzgljadami, est’ zakon’ – glava Minjusta” [“Judging society according to individual religious opinions is inadmissible, there is a law” – The Minister of Justice], *Gazeta.uz*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/02/08/religion/> (accessed 3 June 2023). This position of the minister was rejected by representatives of the clergy as inadmissible and, moreover, irresponsible interference of the state in the affairs of religion. That this is not a polemic but a position developed from Islamic law is exemplified by the argumentation of Mubashshir Ahmad, who refers to the commandment of “encouraging good and forbidding evil” (see, for example, Surah 3:110) as a genuine feature of Islam.

According to Ahmad, the people of Uzbekistan, the majority of whom are Muslims, should therefore not simply be abandoned to hell by other Muslims. Telegram post by Mubashshir Ahmad, 8 February 2022, <https://t.me/s/MubashshirAhmad> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**130** “Prezident davlat maslahatchisi ‘Shariat bilan boshqariladigan islom davlati’ ni orzu qilayotganlarga munosibat bildirdi” [The President’s State Counsellor responded to those who dream of an “Islamic Sharia State”], *Rost24*, 24 January 2022, <https://rost24.uz/uz/news/843> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**131** Bahtiyor Babadjanov interviewed by a news agency: “Sejchas nashe ideologicheskoe prostranstvo pusto i ego zanimajut islamskie propagandisty ochen’ konservativnogo myshlenija – ekspert” [Expert: In our ideological space there is a vacuum that Islamic propagandists occupy with very conservative ideas], *Podrobno.uz*, 28 August 2022, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/obchestvo/sejchas-nashe-ideologicheskoe-prostranstvo-pusto-i-ego-zanimajut-islamskie-propagandisty-ochen-konse/> (accessed 3 June 2023).

individuals by spreading compromising allegations.<sup>132</sup> Rather than reining in preachers and risking conflict with the Muslim majority, the state tolerates them and uses them to control the religious sphere.<sup>133</sup>

This calculation seems to be working, but at the price of an increasing Islamisation of the population. The secular constitution is by no means in jeopardy, as the separation of state and religion is not questioned by the majority (at least there are no signs that it is). But liberal secular principles are being sidelined when the propagation of radical conservative positions by prominent religious authorities is tolerated. The intervention of the minister of justice has demonstrated that these positions contradict the secular values of official Uzbek national culture. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lack of political will to consistently stand up for this secular canon of values.

The reason is obvious: state policy would then also have to defend positions that are unacceptable to the conservative majority, both secular and religious. They mainly concern questions of how to deal with deviations from heteronormative orientations and gender equality – issues that are highly emotional and which therefore have a strong mobilisation potential.<sup>134</sup>

The state's strategy of responding to society's need to acquire religious knowledge by offering appropriate educational opportunities ensures the approval of government politics by the Muslim majority. The same goes for the emphatic affirmation of the Islamic heritage as an integral part of the national culture. But the "secular" approach to religion through academicisation and selective appropriation in the service of state representation is unlikely to succeed.

In particular, social groups that are deprived of proper educational opportunities will not be reached by the state's alternative offers – especially since these are only available to a minority. Anyway, the majority is satisfied with the information available on the internet and social media and its authoritative providers. In the name of the new media freedom, state policy often tolerates their statements in line with the new media freedom even if they contradict secular principles. At the same time, by closely monitoring mosques and cracking down on groups and individuals deemed "extremist", the state is demonstrating that it has the religious field under control – and that a more restrictive religious policy is still an option.

**132** This applies to secular as well as religious opponents: Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: Muslim Blogger Faces Eight-Year Prison Term", 9 December 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/09/uzbekistan-muslim-blogger-faces-eight-year-prison-term> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**133** This conclusion corresponds with the assessments of my interlocutors. Admirers as well as critics of the prominent preachers expressed the view that they were protected by the government, that they were even acting on its behalf. Preachers like Mukhtor Ali are "state trolls", they say, their appearances are "staged", precisely controlled and planned, just like the Friday sermons.

**134** See the case of Miraziz Bazarov: "Uzbekistan Police Blame Victim in Violent Attack on pro-LGBT Activist", *EurasiaNet*, 29 March 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-police-blame-victim-in-violent-attack-on-pro-lgbt-activist> (accessed 3 June 2023).

# Conclusions and Outlook

The reforms introduced since 2016 have increased religious freedom for Uzbek citizens. Islam, which is practised by the majority of the population, has become much more visible in public life – not only because previous restrictions on religious practice have been lifted, but also thanks to a cultural policy that demonstratively presents Islam as a constitutive aspect of national statehood. As a result of liberalisation, the scope for Muslim civil society organisations to engage in charitable activities has expanded, to the extent that they have become a significant substitute for state welfare services. A large number of websites deal with religious issues, especially on social media, an enormous number of religious channels provide information about Islam.

However, granting new freedoms in the practice of religion does not mean that the state is leaving the religious field to itself. While the separation of state and religion is enshrined in the constitution and in the new 2021 religion law, the latter provides for comprehensive state regulation and control of religious institutions, including religious educational institutions, as well as the production and dissemination of religious media. The analysis of legal documents shows an ever-increasing institutional consolidation of control mechanisms since 2017, which is presumably intended to counteract the undesirable effects of liberalisation policies. These control mechanisms are primarily aimed at combating “non-traditional” doctrines that are classified as “extremist” and, instead, institutionalising and propagandising the “correct” (i.e. Hanafi “Uzbek”) Islam as part of the state ideology.

Uzbekistan’s religious policy initiatives are also demonstratively directed at the outside world. The prominent place given to Islamic heritage and the marketing of ritual practice through the promotion of pilgrimage tourism convey the image of a tolerant, “secular” Islam committed to universal values and purified of all undesirable aspects. Appropriated by the state, the Muslim religion becomes a form of cultural expression in the service of science, the arts and progress. With this profiling of Islam, President

Mirziyoyev is consistently continuing the policy of his predecessor – and at the same time setting himself apart from it. The state’s more liberal approach to the religious needs of the population (granting controlled freedom) and the deliberate use of Islam for state representation are stylised as an Islamic “renaissance”.

In this way, the president presents himself as an innovator in Uzbekistan’s unbroken personalised system of rule, pursuing a more liberal course without shaking the foundations of authoritarian rule. The fact that Mirziyoyev does indeed want to hold on to power can be seen not least in the constitution, which was amended in a referendum in April 2023 to extend the presidential mandate from five to seven years and to reset the incumbent’s term limit. As expected, Mirziyoyev won the snap presidential election in July 2023 by a landslide and will now be able to remain in power until 2037.<sup>135</sup>

Mirziyoyev’s political approach is supported by a secular elite and the official clergy. It finds approval among the pro-state milieus and an internationalised layer of intellectuals and technocrats, as well as among the older generation shaped by the Soviet era. However, the state’s efforts to secularise Islam, especially religious education, do not seem to have reached large sections of society. The concept of “spiritual enlightenment” also seems to miss the needs of society. For the majority of Uzbeks, Islam is not science, but faith-based knowledge. For them, the Muslim religion is a system of rules and beliefs that help them lead a life pleasing to God. Religious self-determination means following the precepts of Islam as interpreted by recognised authorities.

This expectation does not contradict state policy – as long as the Muslim authorities teach a quietist Islam that conforms to state guidelines and the faithful are satisfied with it. However, this is not the case

<sup>135</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, Election Observation Mission Republic of Uzbekistan – Early Presidential Election, 9 July 2023, *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/0/548179.pdf> (accessed 15. July 2023).

in parts of society. The great demand for religious instruction is matched by a growing number of people who feel called to such instruction and who drive the demand through their presence on the internet and social media. This creates an internal religious world in which secular principles are challenged, illiberal beliefs are negotiated and illegal material is shared. This internal world is not fully covered by the state system of surveillance, censorship and punishment. In part, it may even be tolerated in a calculated way in order to control religious discourse and provide an outlet for dissent – at least as long as it does not become decidedly political and seriously challenges the ruling elite.

In this way, the state is undoubtedly encouraging Islamisation, especially among the younger generation. This goes hand in hand with the spread of beliefs that contradict liberal principles. But what is the alternative? A return to the repressive practices of the Karimov era would not eliminate undesirable beliefs. Nor is it what the state elite wants, because the damage to President Mirziyoyev's reform project would be considerable. Its success depends largely on the approval of society. The state's handling of human rights and freedoms has become an important criterion for both secular and religious observers in Uzbekistan when assessing politics. The conservative values propagated by state policy are not questioned by the majority of the population, nor is the separation of state and religion.

However, this separation is challenged by the positions of individual authorities who want to place Islamic law above that of the state. These actors are tolerated as long as they remain controllable by the state. Uzbekistan's highly developed surveillance system makes it extremely difficult for Islamic milieus to escape state control. It is highly unlikely that a critical mass will emerge in these milieus, or even in parts of the elite, that would work towards changing the secular framework. Moreover, attempts at politicisation in the name of Islam are nipped in the bud. Even petty offences are punished preventively, often with reference to legal provisions whose validity in the given case is difficult to understand. The arbitrariness and harassment in the application of the law by the state, which has been criticized by the United Nations Human Rights Office and a large number of state and non-governmental organisations, is counterproductive: it does not deter religious hardliners and alienates moderates from the state.

Germany and the European Union should focus on this central policy area, the state's handling of the law. Since the change of government in 2016 and the associated economic opening, Germany and other European states have developed closer relations with Uzbekistan. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has added to this dynamic. The West is hoping to use the emerging realignment of Eurasia to bind its populous and resource-rich countries, including Uzbekistan, more closely to the Western alliance against Russia. The expansion of economic relations is a key instrument here. Conversely, investments and loans from Western economic actors and international financial institutions play a not insignificant role in Uzbekistan's modernisation efforts.<sup>136</sup> For these actors, it is not irrelevant how Uzbekistan positions itself with regard to human rights and freedoms and whether the rule of law is observed. This interest at least suggests that deficits should be pointed out and appropriate reforms demanded.

However, Germany and the European Union have little influence on the discourses within Uzbek society. In particular, Western organisations have almost no access to Islamic institutions and actors. Instead they generally cooperate with secular civil society organisations and state institutions. The unavoidable focus on these actors has always carried the risk of deepening the polarisation between secular and Muslim milieus and reinforcing the illiberal and anti-Western attitudes that are widespread among many Muslims. In terms of constructive cooperation that addresses the problems outlined above, two priorities are therefore recommended:

Cooperation with state institutions should focus primarily on issues of law, legal practice and law enforcement, and promote a more consistent application of the law. In Uzbekistan, this is primarily a question of political will-building, not a lack of knowledge and competence. Therefore, existing access points and all available cooperation formats should be used to raise awareness of the importance of rule of law.

When working with civil society actors, it is important to identify those institutions that offer protection to those most vulnerable to illiberal agitation. The latter comes from individual Islamic preachers, but also from conservative state actors, and primarily affects women. However, the issue of gender equality has become politically viable under Mirziyoyev, and

<sup>136</sup> Schmitz, *Uzbekistan's Transformation* (see note 5), 26.

women are now an important target group of state policy. But gender equality measures are hardly reflected in everyday life. In particular, domestic and sexual violence, which is the subject of the nemolchi.uz (“Do Not Be Silent”) initiative,<sup>137</sup> remains a major challenge. The problem is increasingly discussed in public and a law was passed in April 2023 to better protect women and minors from domestic and sexual violence.<sup>138</sup> However, the structural causes of violence are rarely addressed and state support services such as women’s shelters are inadequate. Political foundations in particular have a useful role to play here, strengthening civil society while supporting an important aspect of the state’s reform agenda.

## Abbreviations

DMU	Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan
IBU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
ICESCO	Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
IIAU	International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan
CRA	Committee for Religious Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OSCE/ODIHR	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OTS	Organisation of Turkic States
SADUM	Spiritual Directorate of the Central Asian Muslims
TIU	Tashkent Islamic University
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
UTO	United Tajik Opposition

**137** Website of the “Do Not Be Silent” initiative: <https://nemolchi.uz/> (accessed 3 June 2023).

**138** Law no. ZRU-829 as of 12 April 2023, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6430278> (accessed 3 June 2023).

