

Rustambek KURBANOV,
*Chairman of the Committee on Interethnic Relations
and Friendly Cooperation with Foreign Countries,
Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Uzbekistan*

THE GUARANTEE OF INTERETHNIC HARMONY IS A PRIORITY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW UZBEKISTAN

For many centuries, tolerance has flourished along the Great Silk Road. Its heart was the territory of present-day Uzbekistan, which formed a link between the East and the West. Since long ago, Muslims have lived here in peaceful coexistence with Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and followers of other faiths.

Uzbekistan is a multinational country where people of more than 130 nationalities and ethnic groups live and successfully work for the benefit of the Motherland in a climate of equality and mutual understanding.

Today, irrespective of ethnic origin, all citizens of Uzbekistan enjoy equal rights and actively contribute to the country's civic, economic, political, and cultural life. Naturally, it has taken no small effort to achieve such a level of excellence.

It must be noted that the political and legal basis for such achievements was set by the adoption of the constitutional provision stipulating that 'All citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall have equal rights and freedoms and shall be equal before the law, without discrimination by sex, race, nationality, language, religion, social origin, convictions and social status.' Another factor of major relevance has been Uzbekistan's unwavering commitment to ensuring respect for the languages, traditions, customs, and cultures of the various nations and ethnic groups; creating the necessary conditions for their development; and prohibiting efforts aimed at infringing the constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens or propagating social, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred.

The Law on Non-Governmental, Non-Profit Organisations is a clear display of civil society in the Republic. The Law regulates the activities of national cultural centres, almost all of which have been founded since independence with constant support from the state. The centres educate the youth in the spirit of respect for the cultural values of all nations and ethnic groups. In doing so, such centres are successfully promoting distinctive national cultures: their native language, traditions, and customs.

To that end, the centres successfully run native language study circles and courses and Sunday schools in which not only children and youth but even adults become immersed in Uzbek history, culture, and traditions.

The study of native tongues is likewise encouraged by the annual events dedicated to International Mother Language Day (21 February). Such events are attended by representatives of UNESCO and various state and non-governmental organisations based in the capital, plus guests from the embassies accredited in Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, secondary and higher education is offered in seven languages: Uzbek, Karakalpak, Russian, Tajik, Kazakh, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz. The Government funds the printing of textbooks for schools and universities. Furthermore, the publication of newspapers and magazines is done in twelve languages; the same goes for TV broadcasting. National television and radio have special programmes such as *In a Family United*, *Uzbekistan – Our Common Home*, etc., which cover the life of multi-ethnic Uzbekistan.

The cultural centres play a key role in preserving the language, traditions, and customs of every ethnic group in Uzbekistan and are regarded as one of the levers for strengthening stability and civil accord in society. Their work, like that of the Committee on Interethnic Relations and Friendly Cooperation with Foreign Countries under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, has accomplished the principal goal of ensuring that the nations and ethnic groups living in Uzbekistan do not actually perceive themselves as national minorities. They maintain close contact with their historical homeland, study their native language, folk art, and traditions, and actively participate in the civic, political, and cultural life of the country that has become their genuine Motherland.

It also merits attention that reformed Uzbekistan ensures the constitutional right of every person to freedom of thought, speech, and opinion, to seek, receive and disseminate the information he or she requires. That, consequently, has been endorsed by the international community.

Since being elected Head of State in Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has paid particular attention to building up a robust civil society during the new stage of development. The process of radical reforms currently underway in the country has spanned all spheres of society's socio-political life.

The President has presented the main programme: the Strategy of Actions in Five Priority Areas for the Development of Uzbekistan for 2017–21. The Strategy also identifies the following issues as its main tasks: enhancing the role of civil society institutions, including the mass media; improving the performance of non-governmental organisations; developing and deploying effective mechanisms for implementing a system of public control in all areas.

One of the main achievements of the elapsed period is stability in the Republic. The state has created all conditions for legal equality and economic and social freedom for all citizens. An important step in this direction was the draft Concept of the state policy in the field of interethnic relations and the Road Map for its implementation. Those documents were approved by a decree of the

President of Uzbekistan in November 2019. The Concept is a unified system of visions that define the goals, principles, and main mechanisms for the implementation of the state policy in the sphere of interethnic relations.

Currently, the Committee coordinates the work of 153 national cultural centres that represent the nations and ethnic groups living in Uzbekistan and 38 associations for friendship with foreign countries. Such interaction promotes peaceful coexistence among all citizens, combats hate speech in the mass media and protects the rights of national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities in our multi-ethnic state.

The President of Uzbekistan also mentioned the issues of interethnic harmony and tolerance during his speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2017 in New York. The President drew the world community's attention to the democratic processes in our society, large-scale reforms in protecting human rights and work with youth, tasks to preserve religious tolerance, regional cooperation, as well as environmental protection.

The leader of our state noted in particular that international terrorism and extremism are based, among other factors, on ignorance and intolerance. In this regard, the most important task is to fight for the minds of the people, especially young people. A proposal was made to develop a United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Young People, a unified international legal instrument aimed at shaping and implementing youth policy in the context of globalisation and the rapid development of information and communication technologies.

Direction 5 of the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–26 sets out the tasks of further improving the system of Government support for national cultural centres, implementing the concept of state policy in the area of interethnic relations, creating favourable conditions for young people of various ethnic groups, fostering their awareness of a sense of civic duty, strengthening patriotism, and enhancing a culture of interethnic communication based on tolerance. The document is also aimed at strengthening relations with compatriots living abroad and implementing a number of other relevant measures.

At the suggestion of the President, in order to ensure state policy to strengthen the atmosphere of interethnic harmony and religious tolerance in society, a decision was taken to hold the annual Peoples' Friendship Day on 30 July. This initiative was put forward in view of the fact that, in accordance with a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, this date is annually celebrated worldwide as the International Day of Friendship.

Of course, the development of each country and its place in the world community are primarily determined by the extent to which peace and harmony and a spirit of tolerance are firmly established in it. The policy of Uzbekistan, which is one of the centres of Islamic culture, is based primarily on the foundations of

interreligious and interethnic harmony. Respect for other cultures, languages, beliefs, and traditions has been passed on as a spiritual value from generation to generation for many centuries.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev pays great attention to the issues of strengthening interethnic harmony and religious tolerance in society. At the initiative of the Head of State, work in this area has been brought to a new level of excellence in recent years. Promoting peace and stability in the Republic has become an essential factor in sustainable development and the successful transformations in the political, socio-economic, and humanitarian spheres, and also in the growth of the country's authority in the international arena.

The identity of each Central Asian state has region-wide traditions that developed during the Silk Road period.

Uzbekistan is the only state in the region that borders all Central Asian countries. Any internal changes in the political and economic life of the Republic, in one way or another, affect the entire region. And the first step towards the rapprochement of Central Asian countries was made by President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

He outlined the principles of international policy at the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly when he drew attention to the need to consolidate the Central Asian region and to develop mutually beneficial ties between neighbours.

It is noteworthy that the respective resolution on 'Enlightenment and religious tolerance', which stresses the vital role of the promotion of education, harmony, human rights, tolerance, and friendship and recognises the importance of cooperation, mutual respect, and understanding in strengthening security and peace in the world, was not only unanimously supported by all UN member states but also adopted with the co-sponsorship of over 50 countries. That testifies to the high recognition by the international community of the relevance and timeliness of the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan.

It should be noted that the majority of the population of Uzbekistan place first not their personal well-being but concern for the health and well-being of their families, relatives, close friends, and neighbours. That is the highest spiritual value of a human being. Our people have never placed themselves above other peoples and have shown due respect for other nations and people of other faiths.

This feature of the Uzbek mentality has developed over many centuries when people of distinctive cultures and civilisations lived on the ancient and fertile land of Uzbekistan, which has contributed to the formation of a special mentality of our people, characterised by kindness, peacefulness, openness, vastness, and generosity of soul.

After all, peace and tranquillity, civil accord, and religious tolerance are the hallmarks that distinguish modern Uzbekistan!