

Religious Freedom, Interethnic Harmony, and the Prevention of Coercive Proselytism: The Experience of New Uzbekistan

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Abstract. *This article examines the relationship among freedom of conscience, interethnic and interconfessional harmony, and the prevention of coercive proselytism in contemporary Uzbekistan. It combines two lines of inquiry that are often treated separately: the analysis of manipulative missionary strategies and the study of Uzbekistan's institutional experience in sustaining solidarity within a multiethnic and multiconfessional society. The research uses normative-legal analysis, comparative interpretation, systems analysis, and institutional synthesis. It distinguishes lawful religious communication and voluntary conversion from practices involving coercion, deception, exploitation of vulnerability, intrusive data use, or incitement to hostility. The findings show that durable security cannot be achieved through prohibition alone. It requires a rights-based preventive model in which constitutional guarantees, proportionate law enforcement, religious literacy, media literacy, social support, interfaith dialogue, cultural institutions, education, mahalla participation, and accessible complaint mechanisms reinforce one another. The article proposes a four-part policy framework: protection of individual freedom of conscience; prevention of coercive and manipulative conduct; development of intergroup trust; and continuous, evidence-based evaluation. The experience of New Uzbekistan is interpreted not as a finished or universally transferable formula but as an evolving model whose strength depends on legal equality, civic inclusion, and the capacity to reconcile national cohesion with religious and cultural diversity.*

Keywords: *freedom of conscience, coercive proselytism, missionary strategy, interethnic harmony, interconfessional dialogue, religious tolerance, New Uzbekistan, human rights, prevention, media literacy*

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Dini azadlıq, millətlərarası harmoniya və məcburi prozelitizmin qarşısının alınması: Yeni Özbəkistan təcrübəsi

Mansur Musayev Tursunpo'latoviç 

Xülasə. Məqalədə müasir Özbəkistanda vicdan azadlığı, millətlərarası və konfessiyalararası həmrəylik, eləcə də məcburedici prozelitizmin qarşısının alınması arasındakı əlaqə araşdırılır. Tədqiqat, adətən, ayrı öyrənilən iki istiqaməti birləşdirir: manipulyativ missioner strategiyalarının təhlili və çoxmillətli, çoxkonfessiyalı cəmiyyətdə ictimai həmrəyliyin qorunmasına dair Özbəkistan təcrübəsi. Normativ-hüquqi təhlil, müqayisəli şərh, sistemli yanaşma və institusional sintez metodlarından istifadə edilmişdir. Qanuni dini ünsiyyət və könüllü etiqad dəyişikliyi məcburetmə, aldatma, sosial zəiflikdən istifadə, şəxsi məlumatlara müdaxilə və düşmənçiliyə təhrik kimi hallardan fərqləndirilir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, davamlı təhlükəsizlik yalnız qadağalarla təmin edilə bilməz. Konstitusional təminatlar, proporsional hüquq tətbiqi, dini və media savadlılığı, sosial müdafiə, dinlərarası dialoq, təhsil, mədəniyyət müəssisələri, məhəllə iştirakı və əlçatan şikayət mexanizmlərinin uzlaşdırıldığı hüquq əsaslı profilaktik model tələb olunur. Məqalədə vicdan azadlığının müdafiəsi, məcburedici davranışın qarşısının alınması, qruplararası etimadın inkişafı və sübuta əsaslanan davamlı qiymətləndirmədən ibarət dörd komponentli model təklif edilir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, hüquqi təminatlar, institusional dialoq və media savadlılığı birlikdə tətbiq edildikdə dini seçim azadlığının qorunması və məcburedici təsirlərin qarşısının alınması daha səmərəli olur.

Açar sözlər: vicdan azadlığı, məcburedici prozelitizm, missioner strategiyası, millətlərarası həmrəylik, konfessiyalararası dialoq, dini tolerantlıq, Yeni Özbəkistan, insan hüquqları, profilaktika, media savadlılığı

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Introduction

Globalization, transnational mobility, digital communication, humanitarian networks, and expanding contact among religious traditions have transformed the environment in which belief is expressed and transmitted. These developments create opportunities for dialogue and voluntary religious choice, but they also permit manipulative actors to reach socially vulnerable groups, conceal organizational purposes, and use digital platforms to intensify emotional pressure. The political problem is therefore not religion itself or the mere circulation of religious ideas. It is the boundary between protected persuasion and conduct that violates autonomy, dignity, equality, or public order.

The two source texts combined in this study approach the issue from different directions. The first focuses on missionary strategies, including targeted outreach to vulnerable persons, charitable assistance tied to recruitment, information control within closed groups, and the use of social media. The second examines Uzbekistan's experience of interethnic solidarity, religious tolerance, cultural diversity, and state-supported dialogue. Read separately, the first may produce an excessively defensive interpretation, while the second may become primarily descriptive. Their integration makes possible a more balanced question: how can society protect freedom of conscience while preventing coercion and strengthening intergroup trust?

The rights-based starting point of this study is the protection of the individual's freedom to have, adopt, change, manifest, or decline a religion or belief. In Uzbekistan, this principle is expressed through the constitutional guarantee of freedom of conscience and the inadmissibility of compulsory imposition of religion (Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023). The analytical consequence is clear: prevention must be directed at coercive conduct and demonstrable harm, not at belief as such.

The Constitution of Uzbekistan guarantees freedom of conscience, the right to profess or not to profess any religion, and the inadmissibility of compulsory imposition of religion (Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023). The 2021 Law on Liberty of Conscience and Religious Organizations establishes the national legal framework for exercising these rights and regulating religious organizations (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on liberty of conscience and religious organizations, 2021). These norms require a methodological distinction between belief, speech, association, charitable work, and conversion on the one hand, and coercion, fraud, exploitation, incitement, or unlawful interference on the other.

Interethnic and interconfessional harmony is not simply the absence of open conflict. It is a positive social capacity built through equality before the law, everyday cooperation, trusted institutions, cultural recognition, and channels for resolving disagreement. Uzbekistan's official discourse treats harmony as a practical system of equality, cultural recognition, education, and civic cooperation. Mirziyoyev's addresses emphasize that interethnic friendship and solidarity are closely connected with peace, social stability, and prosperity (Mirziyoyev, 2017; Mirziyoyev, 2024). Harmony therefore cannot be secured only by controlling contentious messages; it must be reproduced through shared civic life.

The purpose of this article is to formulate an integrated framework for analyzing missionary influence, coercive proselytism, religious freedom, and interethnic harmony in New Uzbekistan. It asks three questions: Which missionary practices should be treated as lawful religious communication and which should be evaluated as coercive or manipulative? What institutional mechanisms convert diversity into stable cooperation? How can prevention remain proportionate, evidence-based, and consistent with human rights?

Methods

The study has a qualitative and interdisciplinary design. It draws on two author-prepared Uzbek-language analytical texts: one concerning contemporary missionary strategies and the other concerning interethnic and interconfessional harmony in New Uzbekistan. They are used as conceptual working materials, not as independently verified empirical datasets. Legal and policy claims are cross-checked against the Constitution of Uzbekistan, the 2021 Law on Liberty of Conscience and Religious Organizations, and the official policy sources listed in the References. Claims concerning particular conflicts, organizations, or covert political control are not treated as established facts without independently verifiable evidence.

Normative-legal analysis was used to compare the source material with the Constitution of Uzbekistan and the Law on Liberty of Conscience and Religious Organizations. Comparative interpretation identified their shared concern: the protection of belief and association together with the prevention of coercion, discrimination, violence, and abuse of rights (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on liberty of conscience and religious organizations, 2021; Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023).

Systems analysis mapped the interaction of legal guarantees, education, family, mahalla, religious organizations, cultural institutions, social welfare, media, civil society, and state agencies. Institutional analysis then examined the specific role and limits of each actor. The method rejects

both institutional isolation and unlimited coordination. Cooperation is necessary, but it must preserve confidentiality, due process, equality, and the autonomy of lawful religious and civic organizations.

A risk-based classification was applied to missionary practice. The analytical indicators were voluntariness, transparency of identity and purpose, informed consent, proportionality of influence, respect for withdrawal, protection of personal data, absence of material dependency, and non-incitement. Conduct was evaluated by observable methods and consequences rather than by the theological content or foreign origin of a belief. This protects minority religions from collective suspicion while allowing targeted responses to harmful behavior.

The study is conceptual and does not measure the prevalence of missionary activity, religious conversion, ethnic tension, or public attitudes. It does not establish criminal or administrative responsibility in any individual case. Its results are a methodological model intended to guide future surveys, interviews, content analysis, institutional assessment, and legal-policy evaluation.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence. OpenAI's ChatGPT was used solely for language editing, reference-consistency checking, and formatting. The author reviewed and approved all revisions and remains fully responsible for the manuscript.

Results

The first result is a four-category distinction among religious communication practices. The first category is protected expression: public teaching, publication, worship, interpersonal discussion, and voluntary association carried out transparently and peacefully. The second is ethically sensitive but generally lawful persuasion, such as intensive advocacy or charitable activity, which requires safeguards when directed at minors or dependent persons. The third is coercive or manipulative proselytism involving deception, threats, exploitation of poverty, conditioning essential aid on religious participation, persistent harassment, information isolation, or abuse of authority. The fourth consists of independently unlawful conduct such as incitement to violence, trafficking, fraud, unlawful detention, or financing prohibited activity. The response should correspond to the category rather than treat every form of mission as identical.

This distinction follows the logic of freedom of religion or belief. Religious freedom protects unpopular and minority beliefs as well as majority traditions; it also protects the individual from forced religion. The state's duty is therefore dual: it must neither impose belief nor permit private actors to destroy meaningful choice through coercion. Accordingly, broad and undifferentiated restrictions may weaken public trust, whereas conduct-based and rights-respecting institutions create a more durable basis for security (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on liberty of conscience and religious organizations, 2021).

The literature supplied by the author also frames missionary influence as a political, ideological, and organizational problem requiring differentiated analysis. Allen's classic study of missionary method is useful for distinguishing open religious witness from institution-centered expansion strategies (Allen, 1956). In the Uzbek context, Hasanboev examines state–religion relations and ideational struggle involving religious organizations and movements (Hasanboev, 2014), while Pakhrutdinov analyzes threats to social development as a subject of political assessment (Pakhrutdinov, 1999). Quronov's discussion of concealed ideological influence likewise underscores the need to look beyond an organization's public image and assess its actual methods (Quronov, 2018). These works are used here as analytical perspectives, not as proof that every missionary or foreign religious activity is coercive.

The second result is a vulnerability model of manipulative recruitment. Social isolation, bereavement, disability, unemployment, family conflict, migration, illness, and weak institutional trust may increase susceptibility to organizations that promise belonging, material help, certainty, or status. Vulnerability does not eliminate agency and must not be used to stigmatize recipients of aid. It does, however, justify stronger ethical duties for organizations working in shelters, schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons, or humanitarian settings.

Charity is particularly sensitive because it can serve both genuine solidarity and concealed recruitment. A rights-based approach does not presume that faith-based assistance is improper. It requires that essential aid remain unconditional, recipients be informed of the provider's identity, participation in worship be voluntary, personal data be protected, and refusal have no negative consequences. Transparent rules protect beneficiaries and also protect reputable religious organizations from generalized suspicion.

The third result concerns digital missionary strategy. Bekpo'latov and Mamadaliev's analysis of information attacks under globalization is especially relevant to the need for critical media competence and institutional resilience (Bekpo'latov & Mamadaliev, 2016). Social media lowers the cost of reaching individuals, permits precise audience targeting, and rewards emotionally intense short-form content. Harmless religious education, interfaith communication, misinformation, and manipulative recruitment can appear on the same platforms. Prevention should therefore emphasize media literacy, disclosure of sponsorship, reporting tools, protection of minors, and investigation of concrete unlawful acts. Blanket blocking is a weak long-term solution because it may drive activity into less visible spaces and reduce opportunities for critical engagement.

The fourth result is an institutional model of interethnic and interconfessional harmony. Constitutional equality provides the legal foundation; schools develop civic and religious literacy; cultural centers preserve linguistic and artistic diversity; religious communities supply moral, charitable, and communal resources; mahallas connect residents to everyday cooperation; civil society creates dialogue and oversight; and state institutions guarantee rights and respond to harm. The model is effective only when each actor remains within a defined mandate.

Uzbekistan's policy framework connects national development with interethnic friendship, religious tolerance, and civic unity. In his address marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Republican International Cultural Center, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev described interethnic friendship and solidarity as an important condition of national peace and prosperity (Mirziyoyev, 2017). His 2024 People's Friendship Day greeting identifies the strengthening of interethnic harmony and tolerance as a priority of the New Uzbekistan reforms and notes the role of national cultural centers, Friendship Houses, education in several languages, and civil-society institutions (Mirziyoyev, 2024). The official 2026 greeting further characterizes peace, interethnic and interreligious friendship, tolerance, and solidarity as a priceless social asset and emphasizes culture and art as a moral bridge among peoples (Mirziyoyev, 2026). These official sources support the article's institutional interpretation of harmony through concrete national practices rather than through abstract declarations alone.

The national discourse on spirituality adds a further preventive dimension. In his address to the expanded meeting of the Republican Council for Spirituality and Enlightenment, Mirziyoyev argued that spirituality must become a new force and movement in social life (Mirziyoyev, 2023). Applied to this study, that proposition means that tolerance and civic solidarity should be reproduced through sustained education, cultural practice, and community responsibility rather than confined to ceremonial events. A 2024 report on the international conference "Religious Tolerance in New Uzbekistan" also records expert discussion of religious tolerance, interfaith accord, and

interconfessional solidarity as factors of peace and identifies unresolved issues as subjects for continued analysis and proposals (UzA, 2024).

The fifth result is that harmony is strengthened by interaction, not only by representation. Cultural festivals, conferences, multilingual education, and public recognition are useful, but their effect depends on whether people cooperate across group boundaries in schools, neighborhoods, professions, volunteering, and problem-solving. The practical value of such interaction is also reflected in official accounts of cultural festivals, Friendship Houses, national cultural centers, multilingual education, and joint public initiatives (Mirziyoyev, 2024; Mirziyoyev, 2026). These mechanisms create repeated opportunities for cooperation before political or social tensions arise.

The sixth result is a preventive cycle with four stages. First, rights and responsibilities are taught through civic, legal, religious, and media literacy. Second, institutions identify risks through lawful complaints, community dialogue, transparent monitoring, and professional assessment. Third, responses are calibrated: counseling, mediation, safeguarding, administrative correction, or criminal investigation is selected according to evidence and severity. Fourth, outcomes are evaluated for both security and rights: reduction of harm, public trust, equal treatment, and the absence of discriminatory side effects.

This cycle transforms prevention from episodic campaigning into accountable governance. Its indicators should include knowledge of rights, confidence in complaint mechanisms, willingness to cooperate across ethnic and religious lines, media-literacy competence, transparency of charitable practice, perceptions of equal treatment, and the proportionate resolution of reported incidents. Counting conferences or publications alone does not demonstrate improved harmony.

Discussion

The combined analysis corrects two opposite methodological errors. The first is securitization without differentiation: the tendency to interpret missionary activity, foreign religious connections, conversion, or minority organization as inherently dangerous. This approach risks violating freedom of conscience, encouraging social suspicion, and obscuring the difference between peaceful belief and harmful conduct. The second error is formal liberalism without safeguarding: the assumption that any activity described as religious expression must be accepted regardless of pressure, dependency, deception, or harm.

A defensible policy uses conduct-based criteria. Coercion may be physical, legal, economic, psychological, or informational. It can include threats, the abuse of professional authority, conditional aid, repeated unwanted contact, isolation from family or independent information, and deliberate concealment of obligations. Yet disagreement, persistent argument, emotional testimony, or a change of religion is not sufficient by itself to prove coercion. Evidence must concern the method and the impairment of free choice.

The principle of proportionality is essential. Restrictions on religious activity must have a clear legal basis, pursue a legitimate protective aim, and be applied proportionately. Registration and legal-personality rules should facilitate lawful religious community life and should not become tools for arbitrary exclusion (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on liberty of conscience and religious organizations, 2021; Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023).

This approach supports national cohesion more effectively than collective labeling. When minority communities trust that their lawful activity is protected, they have stronger incentives to cooperate with public institutions against fraud, violence, and extremist manipulation. Conversely, when entire groups are stigmatized, internal accountability becomes more difficult and grievances may deepen.

Religious freedom and security should therefore be treated as mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive, an approach consistent with the national commitment to protect conscience while strengthening interconfessional accord (Mirziyoyev, 2024).

Education is the central long-term mechanism. Religious literacy helps citizens understand the difference between religions, denominations, movements, and unlawful organizations without theological prejudice. Legal literacy explains the rights to belief, non-belief, conversion, privacy, association, and complaint. Media literacy enables users to identify emotional manipulation, undisclosed sponsorship, false authority, and algorithmic amplification. Together these capacities turn citizens from passive objects of protection into informed moral and legal agents.

Interethnic harmony also requires material and institutional fairness. Cultural celebration cannot compensate for discrimination, unequal access, corruption, or weak social mobility. Social vulnerability is reduced when families can obtain assistance without ideological conditions, young people have meaningful educational and employment pathways, and local institutions respond fairly. Inclusion thus prevents both coercive recruitment and ethnoreligious polarization.

The concept of tolerance should not be reduced to passive endurance. In the context of New Uzbekistan, tolerance is increasingly interpreted as active civic coexistence rather than passive endurance: distinct communities preserve identity while sharing constitutional citizenship and responsibility for peace. The 2024 international conference material similarly connects religious tolerance, interfaith accord, and interconfessional solidarity with peace and sustained institutional dialogue (UzA, 2024).

The model nevertheless has risks. Coordination among mahallas, schools, religious organizations, and law-enforcement bodies may become intrusive if roles are undefined. Prevention programs may produce formalism if they reward the number of events rather than improved trust and competence. Digital monitoring may threaten privacy. These risks require clear legal mandates, data minimization, professional training, independent review, and avenues for appeal.

The study also cautions against unsupported geopolitical explanations. Transnational religious organizations may carry cultural, financial, or political influence, but foreign origin does not establish unlawful purpose. Claims of covert control must be tested with evidence concerning funding, governance, instructions, conduct, and legal violations. This evidentiary discipline improves both academic credibility and policy legitimacy.

Future research should combine nationwide surveys with regional case studies. It should measure experiences of religious freedom, unwanted pressure, intergroup trust, exposure to online religious content, and confidence in institutions. Interviews with religious communities, converts, non-believers, educators, mahalla representatives, social workers, and law-enforcement officials would reveal how legal principles operate in practice. Comparative studies could test which elements of Uzbekistan's model are context-specific and which are transferable.

Conclusion

Missionary strategy and interethnic harmony should not be studied as unrelated subjects. They meet at the question of how a diverse society protects meaningful freedom of conscience while preventing the abuse of vulnerability and preserving civic peace. The central analytical task is differentiation: peaceful religious expression, voluntary persuasion, coercive proselytism, and independently unlawful conduct require different legal and institutional responses.

The experience of New Uzbekistan points toward an integrated model based on constitutional equality, enlightenment, cultural recognition, dialogue, education, community participation, and proportionate prevention. Its success cannot be measured only by the absence of conflict or the number of public events. It must be assessed by citizens' ability to exercise belief or non-belief freely, obtain unconditional assistance, resolve grievances lawfully, cooperate across group boundaries, and trust that institutions will act without discrimination.

Four principles summarize the proposed framework. First, the individual—not an abstract institution—is the bearer of freedom of conscience. Second, prevention should target coercive methods and demonstrable harm rather than religious identity. Third, interethnic and interconfessional harmony must be built through equal rights and everyday cooperation. Fourth, policy should be continuously evaluated through evidence, transparency, proportionality, and independent review.

Under these conditions, national cohesion and religious diversity need not be opposites. A secure society is not one in which beliefs cease to compete, but one in which competition remains peaceful, informed, voluntary, and bounded by dignity and law. Such an approach strengthens both the moral foundations of society and the legitimacy of the institutions responsible for protecting them.

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