

Changing Counter Radicalisation Policy of Uzbekistan on the Internet

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the study of Uzbekistan's new counter radicalisation measures on the Internet under the new President – Shavkat Mirziyoyev who has transferred country's religious policy from 'a defensive to an offensive strategy'. Recent positive changes in state's policy in religious sphere, including its counter measures to reduce online radicalisation, especially, among youth are considered as very timely and necessary steps. Meanwhile, to solve remaining major challenges and tasks effectively in religious sphere, Uzbekistan's model of a secular state with the idea of 'Enlightened Islam' and its ongoing positive approach to countering radicalisation in online and offline space should include strong counter-narratives against radical and extremist ideology. Thus and the success of ongoing reforms in religious sphere depends on the degree of implementation and positive results both in short and long term perspectives which will enhance the level of protection of civil rights, particularly, freedom of religion in the country.

Key words: Internet, Uzbekistan, Counter Radicalisation, Religious Policy, Reforms, Counter-narratives.

The new leadership of Uzbekistan under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev from the year 2017 initiated wide range of reforms and liberalization policy in all spheres, including religious sphere. Uzbekistan's previous religious policy, especially, its counter terrorism, extremism and counter radicalisation policy had been criticized by international community and human rights organizations for violating religious freedom. However, President Mirziyoyev's new policy has shifted the relationship between the state and public to positive landscape for the last years.

In fact, since 2005, Uzbekistan has not faced any terrorist attacks, and Uzbek authorities – who previously used relatively alarmist rhetoric on the problem of extremism – gradually developed more confidence, and considered the problem to be under control. Therefore, Uzbekistan's record on preventing and countering radicalisation, religious extremism and terrorism shows that it is possible to effectively control extremist groups (Cornell, Starr, & Tucker, 2018).

From Defensive to the Offensive Strategy

President Mirziyoyev has straightened out Uzbekistan's religious policy and transferred it from 'a defensive to an offensive strategy' by maintaining "the secular nature of the state, its laws, and its education system. But he also put increasing emphasis on promoting the tolerant Islamic tradition indigenous to Central Asia, something he dubbed 'Enlightened Islam'" (Cornell, & Zenn, 2018, p.8). With President Mirziyoyev's recent religious policy reforms and initiated national idea of 'Enlightened Islam', "Uzbekistan is laying the foundations of an important and unprecedented new direction and model for the Muslim

world as a whole” (Starr, & Cornell, 2018, p.9). Moreover, nowadays Uzbekistan is “confidently presenting an Uzbek model of a secular state in which the moderate and enlightened practices and teachings of Islam and many other religions and faiths are able to flourish” (Vakhabov, 2018, para. 6).

It should be noted that, due to historical circumstances, during the 1990’s Uzbekistan had “to take a hard and uncompromising line against the extremists but to extend a cordial hand of cooperation to the country’s Hanafi clerics and believers, who had deep roots in the society but had suffered heavily during the Soviet period” (Starr, & Cornell, 2018, p.8).

As Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the United States Javlon Vakhabov acknowledged on one hand Uzbekistan’s previous religious policy was more restrictive, on other hand this was in order “to prevent the spread of foreign-based religious extremism that could threaten the survival of Uzbekistan’s secular state. The new leadership of Uzbekistan is openly tackling a backlog of challenges, discussing them with people and decisively introducing measures, first in order to eliminate past practices, and second, to enhance the level of protection of civil rights, particularly freedom of religion” (Vakhabov, 2018, para. 9).

Counter-narratives as an Effective Tool

In response to growing online propaganda of radical ideology and recruitment through the Internet, Uzbekistan has updated its countermeasures and legislation. As with the development of information communication technologies (ICT), radical and extremist organizations have also advanced their capabilities both in real and virtual space. These groups and individuals were some of the earliest adopters of such technologies, and continue to be the most enthusiastic users. The ability of such groups to mobilise destructive forces from all

over the world would not have been possible without access to the internet (Neumann, 2017).

From 2015, particularly prominent among a series of Uzbekistan's measures to counter violent radicalisation has been the use of counter-narratives as a way of challenging radical representation of Islam. "The government launched an online magazine – "The ISIS Fitna" – which has been featured in the country's most prominent online media portal. It also worked with a number of state-sponsored civil society organisations that have published magazines, books, and websites on the dangers of religiously motivated extremism" (Neumann, 2017, p.51).

Moreover, Uzbekistan has launched a number of public awareness campaigns on official government media channels – mainly television channels warning of the dangers of joining religious extremist and terrorist organisations. These counter-terrorism campaigns of the state focused on "exposing and debunking extremist ideology, supporting traditional Islam and strengthening support for its values, promoting harmony among members of different faiths" (Lain, 2016, p.401). And also a part of such campaigns the Ministry of Culture of the Republic Uzbekistan collaborates with local media outlets and cinema.

Moreover besides printed newspapers, "there are several online news media that have been publishing materials on preventing radicalisation and religious extremism, such as 'Uza.uz', 'Gazeta.uz', 'Nuz.uz', 'Tribuna.uz' etc... An addition to this, a private information websites specifically dedicated to preventing violent extremism and radicalisation – 'Stopterror.uz'"¹

Employing these official and private online resources have become a part of Uzbekistan's counter radicalisation strategy. In addition to above mentioned resources, all of governmental and non-governmental entities, and also some influential religious scholars, imams have been launching websites, official pages on social networks such as 'Facebook', 'Instagram' and public channels on messenger

‘Telegram’. All this kind of initiatives are aimed at countering radical ideology and seek to promote religious education among population.

Community Outreach

Counter radicalisation and preventing extremism strategies also include a wide degree of community outreach. The role of local community organisations such as Mahalla - (neighbourhood) is very important in the rehabilitation and reintegration of released prisoners, and is now the part of the process for returning fighters (Lain, 2016). Local representatives of ‘Mahalla’ and local ‘imam’s assist conducting outreach and educate population, especially vulnerable young generation about the dangers of radical and extremist ideologies. “Unwritten social codes help maintain order within the mahalla. Traditionally, elders in such close communities would offer guidance and make decisions in cases of disputes. Either ignored or attacked during the Soviet period, this local cultural structure has been heartily embraced by the Uzbek government as a means to maintain order” (Kangas, 2018, p.5).

Legal Procedures of Controlling Harmful Content

Uzbekistan had practiced online content control and restrictions without transparent procedure until October 2018. With the adoption of the Law “On Countering Extremism” (November 1, 2018) the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan approved a resolution setting out the procedure for restricting access to websites and/or Internet resources. According to the new regulation the Mass Communications Monitoring Centre at the Agency of Information and Mass Communications under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan is responsible for the decisions to block websites that contain prohibited materials or “propagandises extremism, separatism or fundamentalism; calls for violent overthrow of the government; incites national, religious

or ethnic hatred; propagandises drugs or pornography or exposes state secrets”². If the Monitoring Centre concludes that a website has prohibited information, the website disseminating prohibited information is entered into a register and blocked within 12 hours. The Monitoring Centre will exclude remove the website from the registry within 24 hours of receiving a written (electronic) request from the owner of the resource confirming that they have removed the prohibited information from the website. The decision of the Monitoring Centre can be appealed or cancelled in court”³.

International Support and Recognition

Furthermore, the government has been increasingly responsive in fulfilling its international obligations and commitments. In October 2017, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed visited Uzbekistan for the first time in 15 years. The Regional Representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Central Asia, Richard Comenda, and the international non-governmental organizations Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International also paid their first visits to Uzbekistan in many years.

Aftermath UN Special Reporter A. Shaheed’s report results and recommendations have been taken in to account in adapting and revising the main legislations regarding religious sphere.

For instance, Shaheed regarding the legislation had found that there was no clear definition of extremism. Later on, one of the recommendations was reflected Uzbekistan’s newly adopted The Law “On Countering Extremism” which came into force on 1st November, 2018.

Adopted Law “On Countering Extremism” prohibits extremist activity on the territory of the country in any of its manifestations. Accordingly, “the directions of state policy in the field of countering extremism are defined as measures to prevent extremism, identify and

suppress violations of extremism and international cooperation in the field of countering extremism”.⁴

According to the new procedure “the application for recognition of an extremist organization is submitted to “the Supreme Court” of the Republic of Uzbekistan by “the Prosecutor General” of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The list of organizations, which named as extremist organization by the court, will be published on official websites of the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court of the Republic of Uzbekistan”.⁵

For the first time, on 12th of March 2019, by the decision of “Supreme Court of” the Republic of Uzbekistan in accordance with Article 14 of the Law “On Countering Extremism” a number of organizations and online resources were prohibited and recognized as extremist and terrorist. The decision of “Supreme Court” and the list of prohibited organizations and online resources on the territory of the country were published on official websites of the Ministry of Justice.⁶

Moreover, most of law enforcement agencies and other entities engaged in activities to counter extremism and terrorism under current President are being reformed facing considerable changes in organizational, institutional and legal bases.

As a result of these efforts and positive changes in the state’s approach and policy on religion and religious organizations, “on December 11, 2018 (for the first time since 2006), Uzbekistan was not designated by the U.S. State Department as a “Country of Particular Concern” for restrictions on religious freedom” (Umarov, 2019, para. 9). “Uzbekistan has become the second country in the world that the U.S. Department of State has withdrawn from the “Countries of Particular Concern” list (CPC) over the past 20 years”.⁷ In turn, moving Uzbekistan to the Special Watch List from CPC list has demonstrated positive improvements in country’s respect for religious freedom and protection of civil rights.⁸ Moreover, the recent report of the U.S. Commission on

International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) for 2019 on the state of religious freedom in the world mentioned some improvements in Uzbekistan and recognized the government's notable steps to address significant religious freedom concerns. USCIRF has also removed Uzbekistan from its list of "countries of particular concern" and recommended for more progresses in the field.⁹

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reforms and liberalization policy in religious sphere despite remaining major challenges and tasks to do on the whole have remarkably improved freedom of religion and religious practice in the country. Moreover public support of the current leadership is considerably growing in this direction. The latest public poll conducted by The Center for the Study of Public Opinion "Ijtimoy Fikr" (Public Opinion) reveals that more than 90% of the population of Uzbekistan positively assesses the state policy in the field of religion which meets the religious needs of believers in the country. Moreover, according to the survey more than 76% of respondents believe that the problem of religious extremism and terrorism continues to be the main threat to the stability of the countries of the Central Asian region, including Uzbekistan. The overwhelming majority of respondents (99%) extremely negatively perceive religious extremist movements. And also 31 % of respondents note that online resources, including Internet in general, where religious information is presented in a distorted form pose security and ideological threats to the population.¹⁰

Consequently, as public support to state's policy toward countering religious extremism and radicalisation is growing Uzbekistan should have strong compelling counter-narratives against extremist and radical ideologies, and also prioritize the rule of law in counter radicalisation policy. Counter-narratives, alternative narratives and positive approach to counter violent extremism and radicalisation could be more effective and constructive both in short and long term

perspectives. Moreover, the success and the prospects of ongoing reforms in religious sphere depends on the degree of implementation and positive outcomes which intended to enhance the level of protection of civil rights, particularly, freedom of religion in the country.

¹ See Internews. (2019a). *Information flows and Radicalisation leading to violent extremism in Central Asia*. Retrieved from https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/Information_flow_and_RVE.pdf

² Yeniseyev, M. (2018a). *New regulations in Uzbekistan detail procedures to block extremist websites*. Retrieved from https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/10/01/feature-01

³ See Internews. (2019b). *Violent Extremism in Central Asia 2018: A preliminary survey of groups, digital dimensions and state responses*. Retrieved from https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/VE-CA-Public_Version.pdf

⁴ See Uzdaily. (2018, July 31). President signs law “On Countering Extremism.” Retrieved from <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/45095>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ See Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2019). *The list of extremist organizations announced*. Retrieved from <http://www.minjust.uz/uz/press-center/news/96731/>

⁷ See Kun.uz. (2018, December 12). *U.S. Department of State removes Uzbekistan from the “Countries of Particular Concern” list*. Retrieved from <https://kun.uz/en/news/2018/12/12/us-department-of-state-removes-uzbekistan-from-the-countries-of-particular-concern-list>

⁸ Yeniseyev, M. (2018b). *Uzbekistan makes progress in respecting religious freedom*. Retrieved from https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/12/27/feature-01

⁹ See Pravda Vostoka. (2020, April 29). *USCIRF removes Uzbekistan from CPC list*. Retrieved from <https://pv.uz/en/news/uscirf-removes-uzbekistan-from-cpc-list>

¹⁰ See Ijtimoiy fikr. (2018, February 19). *Ijtimoiy fikr uzna stepen religioznosti uzbekistantsev (“Ijtimoiy fikr” reveals the level of religiosity of Uzbeks)*. Retrieved from http://ijtimoiy-fikr.uz/ru/publikacii_v_smi/ijtimoiy_fikr_uznal_stepen_religioznosti_uzbekistancev

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