



PROSPECTS FOR BUILDING A DEMOCRATIC, LEGAL, AND SECULAR STATE IN UZBEKISTAN

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 11 th April 2026 Accepted: 10 th May 2026	This article analyzes the constitutional and legal foundations for building a democratic, law-based, and secular state in Uzbekistan, as well as the main directions and prospects of the ongoing political and legal reforms. The article highlights that the Constitution of Uzbekistan enshrines the principles of a democratic, law-based, social, and secular state, constitutional guarantees for human rights and freedoms, the separation of powers, the rule of law, freedom of conscience, and the legal status of civil society institutions. Furthermore, reforms implemented in the judicial system, human rights protection, public oversight, media freedom, political pluralism, and religious freedom are evaluated from the perspective of international legal standards. An analysis of Uzbekistan's cooperation with international organizations was conducted, and scientific and practical conclusions were formulated aimed at further developing democratic institutions, strengthening judicial independence, ensuring human rights guarantees in practice, and creating broad opportunities for political competition and civil society.

Keywords: Democratic state, rule-of-law state, secular state, constitution, human rights, rule of law, freedom of conscience, civil society, political pluralism, judicial independence, international law, democratic reforms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early years of independence, building a democratic, law-based state and a strong civil society has been identified as one of Uzbekistan's strategic goals. In recent years in particular, wide-ranging reforms have been carried out in the political, legal, economic, and social spheres of state and public life on the basis of the "New Uzbekistan" concept. An important feature of this process is that, alongside modernizing the system of public administration, particular attention is being paid to ensuring human rights and freedoms, strengthening the rule of law, developing civil society institutions, and organizing state-society relations on new constitutional foundations.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The new redaction of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, adopted by nationwide referendum on 30 April 2023, further reinforced at the constitutional level the country's status as a sovereign, democratic, law-based, social, and secular state. While this provision, set out in Article 1 of the Constitution, clearly defines the priority directions of state-building, Article 7 establishes that the people are the sole source of state power, and Article 11 enshrines the

principle of the division of state power into legislative, executive, and judicial branches[1].

The constitutional foundation of building a democratic state is inseparably linked to recognizing the human being as the highest value. Article 13 of the Constitution establishes that democracy is based on universal human principles and that the human being, his or her life, freedom, honor, and dignity are the highest value. Article 14 provides that the state shall carry out its activities on the basis of the principles of legality, social justice, and solidarity, thereby defining the legal and social criteria for the functioning of state power.

The most important feature of a law-based state is the rule of law. Under Article 15 of the Constitution, the supremacy of the Constitution and laws is unconditionally recognized in the Republic of Uzbekistan. The Constitution has supreme legal force and applies directly throughout the entire territory of the country. At the same time, the international treaties of the Republic of Uzbekistan, together with the universally recognized principles and norms of international law, are recognized as an integral part of the national legal system. If an international treaty of the Republic of Uzbekistan establishes rules different from those provided for in domestic legislation, the



rules of the international treaty shall apply. This ensures the close connection between the national legal system and international legal obligations.

The secular character of the state is likewise expressed in a number of provisions of the Constitution. In particular, under Article 12 of the Constitution, no ideology may be established as the state ideology in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Article 35 guarantees freedom of conscience, establishing that everyone has the right to profess any religion or to profess none. The prohibition on forcibly imposing religious views is an important constitutional guarantee that protects the inviolability of a person's beliefs. Article 75 of the Constitution establishes the separation of religion from the state and the equality of religious organizations and confessions before the law.

These constitutional provisions demonstrate the interconnection between the concepts of a democratic, law-based, and secular state. Democracy presupposes popular sovereignty and political participation; a law-based state presupposes the rule of law and human rights; and a secular state presupposes the legal separation of the state from religious organizations and equal treatment of different beliefs.

In recent years, wide-ranging measures have been implemented to put these constitutional principles into practice, including reforming the judicial system, protecting human rights, developing civil society institutions, and ensuring the openness of public administration. To improve the system for selecting and appointing judges, the Supreme Judicial Council was established, a system of administrative courts was formed, and citizens' opportunities to appeal to court against decisions of state bodies and officials were expanded. The practical significance of the institution of habeas corpus was increased, and judicial oversight in applying certain procedural measures of restraint was strengthened.

3. RESULTS

Judicial and legal reforms have also been aligned with the process of liberalizing criminal and criminal-procedural legislation. Measures aimed at decriminalizing certain acts, making wider use of alternative types of punishment, and ensuring individuals' rights and freedoms through procedural guarantees are serving to give practical effect to the principles of a law-based state. However, a sustainable model of a law-based state is determined not only by the adoption of new laws but also by their uniform, fair, and effective application.

Important changes have also been made in ensuring human rights. Legal mechanisms have been improved with regard to eliminating forced and child labor, protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, ensuring gender equality, safeguarding children's

rights, and expanding the powers of the Ombudsman institution. The adoption in 2020 of the National Strategy of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Human Rights once again confirmed that ensuring human rights is one of the priority directions of state policy[2].

In developing civil society, the legal foundations of the institution of public oversight have been established. The Law "On Public Oversight" defined the forms through which citizens and civil society institutions exercise oversight over the activities of state bodies. Instruments such as public discussions, citizens' appeals, and the publication of critical materials in the mass media play an important role in ensuring the openness and accountability of state bodies. In addition, the introduction of the institution of public reception offices has institutionally strengthened dialogue between state bodies and the population.

Certain processes of liberalization have also been observed in the sphere of mass media and freedom of speech. The activity of online publications, the development of the institution of blogging, and the strengthening of the press services of state bodies have helped shape an environment of open discussion in society. However, assessments by international organizations note that serious problems still exist in the sphere of press and freedom of speech in Uzbekistan. For this reason, at the next stage of building a democratic state, it is important to further strengthen freedom of information and the accountability of state bodies to the public. The process of building a democratic and law-based state in Uzbekistan cannot be envisaged separately from international legal standards. Uzbekistan participates in the core international human rights treaties of the United Nations. Fundamental principles established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – human dignity, equality, and freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and expression – find their expression in national constitutional provisions. Uzbekistan's accession in 1995 to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also defines the country's international obligations in the field of human rights[3].

The harmonization of national legislation with international legal standards is an important condition for building a democratic state. In this regard, the fact that the Constitution defines the place of international treaties within the national legal system is of particular importance. At the same time, the full incorporation of international obligations into national legislation and law-enforcement practice remains an urgent issue.

The process of building a secular state in Uzbekistan is closely linked to ensuring freedom of conscience and religious tolerance. Secularism means the separation



of the state from religion, the fact that no religious doctrine may be established as the state ideology, and the state's equal and impartial attitude toward different religious beliefs. From this standpoint, it is important to interpret secularism not as a means of restricting religion, but as a constitutional principle that creates the legal conditions for a person to freely express religious or non-religious views.

4. DISCUSSION

The Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," adopted in a new redaction in 2021, marked an important stage in regulating legal relations in the religious sphere. The Law reinforced guarantees such as everyone's right to profess any religion or to profess none, and the prohibition of discrimination based on one's attitude toward religion. The easing of certain requirements related to the registration of religious organizations was also a positive step from the standpoint of ensuring religious freedom.

At the same time, in the legal model of a secular state, a proportionate balance must be ensured between the state's powers to regulate the religious sphere and an individual's freedom of conscience. Measures taken to prevent extremism and terrorism must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate, and a clear legal boundary must be established between peaceful religious activity and actions aimed at violence or terrorism. In this sense, strengthening legal clarity, individual responsibility, and judicial oversight mechanisms in countering extremism is an important guarantee for ensuring human rights.

Uzbekistan's cooperation with international organizations is also an important factor influencing the process of building a democratic and law-based state. The country's cooperation with the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and other international institutions continues to expand. Uzbekistan's membership on the UN Human Rights Council in 2021–2023, and its promotion of international initiatives on human rights, religious tolerance, and youth rights, demonstrate the country's active engagement in the international legal arena.

The development of relations with the European Union also serves as an important external factor for reforms in the field of human rights and the rule of law. The status granted to Uzbekistan under the GSP+ preferential trade scheme also entails mechanisms for regularly assessing the country's implementation of its obligations under international conventions on human rights, labor rights, and other matters[4].

The prospects of a law-based state are directly linked to the independence of the judiciary. Matters such as the selection and appointment of judges, guarantees of tenure, the financial and institutional independence

of the courts, ensuring the enforcement of court decisions, and expanding the procedural capacities of the bar are important institutions of a law-based state. It is also necessary to ensure a proportionate balance between the procedural capacities of the prosecution and the defense in criminal cases, to prevent torture, and to strengthen judicial oversight.

The free operation of human rights and civil society institutions is also an important condition for building a democratic state. Further simplifying the registration procedures for non-governmental non-profit organizations, creating a transparent legal environment for their financial and organizational activities, and strengthening public oversight mechanisms all increase the institutional capacity of civil society. In particular, the development of independent civic initiatives in areas such as human rights, anti-corruption, environmental safety, and social protection strengthens cooperation between the state and society.

Freedom of the mass media is likewise an integral part of this process. Preventing unwarranted interference in the professional activity of journalists, ensuring the openness of state bodies, guaranteeing the right to access information, and protecting the lawful activity of journalists and bloggers are important conditions for a democratic society. In this regard, a fair balance must be maintained between freedom of expression and the protection of a person's honor, dignity, and other lawful interests.

The prospects for building a secular state require that relations between the state and religion be regulated in a legally clear and proportionate manner. Secularism must ensure the state's religious neutrality, but it must not become grounds for unjustifiably restricting citizens' peaceful religious beliefs. Freedom of conscience must be guaranteed as a person's fundamental right, religious organizations must operate on an equal footing before the law, and discrimination based on religious belief must not be permitted.

In this regard, harmonizing effective mechanisms for countering extremism and terrorism with human rights is of particular importance. Strict legal measures must be taken against actions involving violence, terrorism, or a genuine threat to the constitutional order. Ensuring interethnic and interfaith harmony is also an important condition for Uzbekistan's development as a democratic and secular state.

In a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society, the state must ensure the equality of all citizens, protect the cultural rights of all citizens, and strengthen an environment of tolerance and mutual respect. In this regard, it is appropriate to ensure harmony based on human rights and the rule of law between secularism



and national values, rather than opposition between them.

Uzbekistan's international standing as a democratic and law-based state also depends on the effectiveness of domestic reforms. International rankings, reports by international organizations, and treaty-based monitoring mechanisms make it possible to assess legal and institutional changes in the country from an external perspective. For this reason, international cooperation should be viewed not only within the framework of external political or economic interests, but also as a means of improving legal institutions, harmonizing national legislation with international standards, and strengthening human rights protection mechanisms.

Building a democratic, law-based, and secular state is a long-term and continuous process that cannot be limited solely to legislative changes. The effective implementation of adopted constitutional norms and laws, the growth of legal culture, the accountability of state bodies, an independent judiciary, free mass media, and an active civil society determine the real substance of this process.

The constitutional and legal foundations for building a democratic, law-based, and secular state in Uzbekistan are being consistently formed today. The fact that the new redaction of the Constitution clearly defines the state's democratic, law-based, social, and secular status, and that fundamental principles – the priority of human rights and freedoms, the rule of law, the separation of powers, freedom of conscience, and the equality of citizens – are constitutionally guaranteed, has strengthened the legal foundation of this process.

At the next stage of building a democratic and law-based state in Uzbekistan, priority must be given to a number of tasks. In particular, it is essential to strengthen political pluralism and genuine political competition, ensure the competitiveness of elections, further reinforce the institutional independence of the judiciary, improve the practical mechanisms for protecting human rights, expand the legal conditions for the free operation of civil society institutions, and guarantee freedom of the mass media.

5. CONCLUSION

From the standpoint of building a secular state, it is important to ensure legal proportionality in relations between the state and religion, to fully guarantee freedom of conscience, to ensure equal and impartial treatment of religious organizations, and to strictly adhere to human rights standards in countering extremism and terrorism. Overall, Uzbekistan's prospects as a democratic, law-based, and secular state are determined by the practical effectiveness of the adopted constitutional norms, the accountability of state institutions, respect for human rights, the activity

of civil society, and the consistent fulfillment of international legal obligations. Ensuring harmony between legal norms and the practice of their application is of decisive importance for democratic reforms to become sustainable and irreversible.

As President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has emphasized, "The New Uzbekistan is a state that develops on the basis of friendly cooperation with the world community, strictly observing universally recognized norms of democracy and human rights and freedoms, with the ultimate goal of creating a free and prosperous life for our people.[5]"

Achieving this goal requires consistent legal reforms, openness, accountability, and a human-rights-based approach from all institutions of the state and society. This transforms the process of building a democratic, law-based, and secular state in Uzbekistan into not merely a constitutional goal, but a stable institutional reality.

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