

Relevant INFORMATION of the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan in order to present commendable practices implemented in preventing the propagation of hatred on the basis of religion or belief for the report to be presented to the 55th session of the UN Human Rights Council

Preservation and development of the historically existing traditions of tolerance, religious and ethnic diversity in Azerbaijan, as well as strengthening the environment of mutual understanding and dialogue between the religious confessions operating in the country are the priority directions of the religious policy of the Azerbaijan government. The policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the field of religion is based on freedom of thought and speech, freedom of conscience, taking into account the presence of religion in various forms in the society. Religious policy in the country is based on the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Articles 18th ("State and Religion"), 25th ("Right to Equality"), 47th ("Freedom of Thought and Speech"), 48th ("Freedom of Conscience")), as well as the norms and principles of international law, international agreements that the Republic of Azerbaijan is a party to, and other normative legal acts.

The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Freedom of Religious Belief" is a main legal source to regulate the relations arising from activities of religious associations, define the duties, rights and status of religious associations and create guarantees for implementation of freedom of religious belief in the country. Our legislation has been coordinated with the provisions of international conventions and other normative legal acts to which Azerbaijan is a party.

The State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (or State Committee) which was established on June 21, 2001, is the central executive body implementing state policy in the field of religion. The State Committee also supports the strengthening of an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding and tolerance between the institutions of different faiths, the prevention of religious radicalism and extremism, religious conflict and discrimination, assists in the participation of religious communities in international religious movements, forums, business relations with international religious centers and foreign religious communities, organizes the training of specialists in the field of religion.

In addition, by the relevant Decree and Order of President Ilham Aliyev, Moral Values Promotion Fund and Azerbaijan Institute of Theology were established under the State Committee on Religious Associations, which they work to preserve and develop the religious and spiritual environment in our country.

The Law "On Combating Religious Extremism", which defines the legal and organizational foundations of the fight against religious extremism in the country, as well as the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Republic of Azerbaijan can be considered legal and normative documents in the fight against extremism, radicalism and terrorism.

In Azerbaijan no one has ever been oppressed or persecuted because of their religious views and beliefs. However, according to Azerbaijani legislation, religious affiliation does not exempt people from responsibility. According to Article 48 of the Constitution ("Freedom of Conscience"), religious beliefs and convictions do not justify a violation of law.

Azerbaijan does not have an official state religion. Nevertheless, in matters related to religion, the state is not indifferent to the demands of citizens, but responds to religious needs through relevant state institutions. The state also pays special attention to equality in the work of supporting the activities of religious institutions related to social services and public projects. Thus, since 2011, the state allocates financial aid to both Islamic and non-Islamic religious communities.

According to estimates, 96 percent of Azerbaijan's population are Muslims, and 4 percent are Christians, Jews, and representatives of other religions. Since the beginning of the process of re-registration of religious institutions (September 1, 2009), 995 religious institutions have passed state registration so far. From the religious point of view, 958 of them are Islamic, and 37 are non-Islamic (Christian – 26; Jewish – 8; Krishna – 1; Baha'i – 2).

The State Committee organizes various events in cities and regions in order to promote peace and human rights, to strengthen tolerance and inter-religious dialogue, in our country within "Month of Peace" (August 21-September 21), "Children's Rights Month" (October 20-November 20) and "November 16 – International Tolerance Day". In those events, issues related to ensuring freedom of conscience, preservation of traditions of tolerance formed historically in Azerbaijan, support of interreligious dialogue, and non-allowance of religious and national discrimination are discussed. Representatives of religious and national minorities, non-governmental organizations operating in this field, as well as representatives of religious organizations are actively involved in the above-mentioned events.

In Azerbaijan, non-Islamic religious communities have the right to obey and change their affiliation to religious centers operating abroad. Also, non-Islamic religious institutions with their organizational centers abroad may be guided by the statutes of those centers in cases unless their activities do not contradict the legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan. At present, the religious centers of the vast majority of non-Islamic religious organizations, including the Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, and Georgian Orthodox churches, are located abroad,

and the religious leaders, who lead the religious rites in these churches, as well as in Protestant and Jewish religious communities are appointed from the centers abroad.

The stability of the religious situation in the country and the high level of tolerance, the absence of any discrimination between citizens based on their religious beliefs, create favorable conditions for those religious institutions to freely operate as legal entities in their houses of worship, perform religious rituals, hold religious holidays and ceremonies, and ensures their freedom to worship.

Regardless of affiliation, Azerbaijan respects its religious and cultural heritage in accordance with the historically formed traditions of coexistence, as well as international legal norms. Azerbaijan has always protected all religious-historical monuments, regardless of their religious affiliation, and kept their originality. Although the majority of the population is Muslim, there are historically formed religious temples - churches, synagogues, etc. the preservation of non-Muslim monuments is proof of this. Also, the Armenian Gregorian Church, together with thousands of ancient manuscripts, is preserved in the center of Baku despite the long-lasting conflict.

In the history of Azerbaijan's independence, no religious-cultural monument was destroyed or changed. The position of Azerbaijan during the 44-day Patriotic War (27.09.2020-10.11.2020) and in the current period is a clear example. Major repair and restoration works are currently being carried out in the liberated territories, such as mosques in Aghdam Juma and Giyasli, as well as in Zangilan and Hadrut. In Shusha, Yukhari Govharaga, Ashaghi Govharaga and Saatli mosques were repaired. In addition to these, the restoration of the churches in Shusha (Kazanchi) and in Khojavand is a clear demonstration that Azerbaijan does not discriminate against monuments, but respects different cultures and religions, and sees all religious examples as a part of its national-spiritual values.

In order to prevent any form of religious fanaticism, radicalism and extremism, in the first 6 months of 2023, about 80 preventive measures and more than 60 measures were organized in the direction of tolerance, multiculturalism, inter-religious and inter-denominational rapprochement. At these events, taking into account the specific characteristics of the region, there were speeches on educational topics in order to prevent intolerance, discrimination, conflict and violence between members of different religions and sects, to strengthen tolerance in the activities of religious communities, to prevent radicalism tendencies in society and to involve religious communities in this work. Leaders of executive authorities and law enforcement agencies of various cities and regions of the republic, youth, heads of religious communities, clergymen, believers, theologians, intellectuals and public activists participated in the meetings where effective discussions were held.