

The religious tolerance level in Tajikistan has recently decreased, as experts insist. According to them, the arising conflicts with the followers of Zoroastrianism are the example of this trend.

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Mug Castle. Photo: CABAR.asia

Before Islam, Iran and a large part of the Central Asia, including modern Tajikistan, were completely influenced by Zoroastrians.

Fariddun Khodizoda, religious analyst, believes that despite the “hostility to the old Zoroastrian religion and everything associated with it” in a part of society, it should recognize that this is part of its history.

“We cannot deny this. If today we abandon the Zoroastrian heritage, its traditions and culture, then we must also disclaim Ferdowsi’s masterpiece “Shahnameh”, since several chapters of the “Shahnameh” deal with Zoroastrianism”, says Fariddun Khodizoda.



Fariddun Hodizoda. Photo: ozodi.org

Despite this fact, publications on social networks defending the values of the Zoroastrian religion often encounter a negative reaction from Islamic community’s representatives in Tajikistan.

Such a sharp dispute occurred recently during the debate of journalist Abdukadir Talbakov on Facebook, after which, due to complaints, law enforcement authorities invited Talbakov for questioning.

In CABAR.asia interview, **Abdukadir Talbakov** said that he himself was not Zoroastrianism follower, but emphasized that Zoroaster was the prophet of the Iranian peoples and Zoroastrianism was the first monotheistic religion in history.



Odinashoh Kurbonov, Photo: ozodi.org

Unlike Talbakov, **Odinashoh Kurbonov** and his family, residents of Shamsiddin Shohin (former Shurobod) district, not just profess Zoroastrianism, but also speak freely about their beliefs. Despite the fact that this family lives among Muslims, the fellow villagers treat them with respect, since they believe that Kurbonovs do not impose their views on anyone.

In CABAR.asia interview, **Odinashoh Kurbonov** said that he had never heard mean talks about himself and his family. He is a construction worker and took part in the construction of more than ten mosques in his area, and believes that he should never forcibly impose his ideas on anyone.

Jamoliddin Khomushov, clergyman, referred to the fact that Muslims have extensive experience living together with people of different faiths.

According to him, Tajik legislation guarantees complete freedom of religion, while the Sharia recommends Muslims to be tolerant of another religion's followers.

Tahmina (not her real name) lives in Northern Tajikistan and follows Zoroastrianism. Unlike Odinashoh Kurbanov, sometimes she is subjected to pressure from the Muslims, and therefore she has to hide her religious identity.

Tahmina said that in Tajikistan, the issue of choosing the Zoroastrian religion is up to each and everyone, and so far, she has never tried to persuade anyone to adopt Zoroastrianism.

Tahmina wants the Zoroastrians also to have their special day to celebrate important to their religion dates.

Why Is the Zoroastrian Community Not Registered?

Religious analyst Faridun Khodizoda believes that Zoroastrians exist in Tajikistan, but they hide their religious identity, otherwise the society may not accept them or even endanger their lives.

He added that level of hostility to Zoroastrianism is significant, since the general level of religious prejudice in the country is high.



Mug Castle. Photo: CABAR.asia

According to **Afshini Mukim**, the press secretary of the Committee of Religion under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, there is currently no community in Tajikistan that would officially declare their status as Zoroastrianism followers and no one has made an official statement to the Committee. According to him, currently, no Zoroastrian religious community exists in Tajikistan.

Expert **Nazri Asadzoda** believes that the main reason for the non-registration of the community is the fear of public opinion of the predominantly Muslim population of the country.

According to him, Zoroastrianism followers fear not just moral disapproval, but also the potential threats to physical security. The eloquent evidence of the reality of such threats is the murder of a young adherent of Zoroastrianism Rudaki Samadov.

Rudaki Samadov, one of the supporters of Aryan culture revival, was killed in 2001. His recent work in cinema, theater and the book publishing has been mainly associated with

Zoroastrianism. The media reported Samadov's belonging to this religion as one of the versions of the murder motive.

According to **Nazri Asadzoda**, there are almost no conditions for official registration of any community in Tajikistan. In addition, they must have basic religious literature and draft regulations of their religious organization, must reasonably explain the cause for the transition to Zoroastrianism, and should be aware of the philosophy, rules, principles and practices of this religion.

At the same time, to register as a legal entity, a religious organization must necessarily indicate the exact location of its organization, that is, the building in which it will carry out its activities.

Currently, in Tajik society, even these first steps have not been taken to register the Zoroastrian community.

Qalai Mug as One of the Symbols of the Zoroastrian Heritage

A few years ago, the first Zoroastrianism symbol, a religious temple, was restored in Tajikistan. This temple, known as Qalai Mug, is located on the eastern outskirts of Istaravshan in the Sughd region.

Ziyo Abdullo, Tajik scientist and the author of publications on Zoroastrianism, notes that in Iran, with more than 70 million population, magazines and several books on Zoroastrianism are translated and published, and society is comfortable with it.

"In the nine millionth population of Tajikistan, the level of education is much lower comparing with the Iranian society. If you start a conversation about Zoroaster, they will say that you are Zoroastrianism follower. If you talk about Jesus, they will call you are a Christian, if you recall Buddha, they will label you as a Buddhist. This is a sign of conservative thinking and prejudices", says Ziyo Abdullo.

According to journalist **Zavkibek Saidamini**, mainly small groups on social networks conduct propaganda and debate about Zoroastrianism. They do it covertly and do not even advertise their affiliation with this religion. Saidamini is concerned that in the “Muslim society” of Tajikistan, the state has imposed some restrictions on Islam, which gives other religions “greater freedom for their activities”.

“That is, when the ideological space is empty, of course, the invasion of other religions alien to us begins”, Zavkibek Saidamini said.



Zavkibek Saidamini. Photo: CABAR.asia

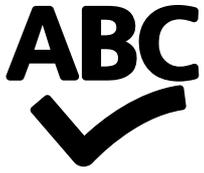
Isfandiyor Odina, civil society activist who often engages in such discussions, says that many of those who put forward “Zoroastrian ideas” online are not necessarily Zoroastrians.

“Most of them are nationalists, communists or even opponents of Islam”, said Isfandiyor Odina.

According to him, they use non-Islamic ideas, especially the ideas of Zoroastrians, or ideas related to ancient Iran to express their rejection of Islam. Odina believes that most of them do not have sufficient knowledge of the Zoroastrian religion and are not officially Zoroastrians themselves.

Isfandiyor Odina notes that hostility to Zoroastrianism and its traditions is high, especially among the clergy and youth who studied in the Arab countries. They publish critical posts about Zoroastrianism on social networks, which sometimes causes sharp disputes.

“Of course, these actions indicate the fact that the Tajik clergy and youth are very frightened by the likelihood of Zoroastrianism spreading, and this can cause a conflict around this religion in every occasion. The reason for their concern is clear. It is that Tajiks have historical and cultural roots connected with Zoroastrianism”, says Isfandiyor Odina.



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