

THE CRISIS OF INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN UZBEKISTAN ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE AND WAYS TO OVERCOME IT

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the crisis in interethnic relations that emerged in Uzbekistan in the late 1980s, on the eve of independence. It explores the decline of attention to national issues during the final years of the Soviet period, the socio-economic tensions, migration processes, and the consequences of the artificially promoted multiethnic policy. Using the example of the 1989 Fergana events, the article examines the roots of interethnic conflicts, the measures taken to overcome them, and the political and ideological steps implemented under the leadership of the First President, Islam Karimov. The study also highlights the historical lessons related to ensuring interethnic harmony, tolerance, and strengthening traditions of mutual respect in society.

Keywords: Independence, interethnic relations, crisis, Soviet period, "perestroika", Fergana events, political reforms, tolerance.

Introduction

The policy of "Perestroika" (reconstruction), which began in the mid-1980s, resulted in the peoples of the former Soviet Union taking the path of fighting for their own interests, and they began to move towards protecting the intensifying national interests. The aggravation of interethnic relations in the last years of Soviet rule was largely associated with the centralized administrative-command system. The path to eliminating the tension in interethnic relations in a number of regions of the former Soviet Union could not be realized without knowing the national composition of the population in each territory. The failure of the Center to develop a consistent policy that would align with the interests of every nation and ethnic group within the Union led to the aggravation of interethnic relations. The First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, I.A. Karimov, assessing the deepening national relations throughout the country, said: "...this was a natural aspiration to preserve deep national values, the peculiarities and traditions of people, an objective, completely justified need aimed at preserving the nation as a subject of social, spiritual, and historical development" [1, b.473].

The aggravation of interethnic relations in the final years of the Soviet era was caused by the reduced attention paid to national problems. In turn, demographic processes also exerted their negative influence on interethnic relations. We can divide these factors into three:

First, the mostly one-way direction of population migration. Second, the differences in the natural growth rates of nationalities in the republic. Third, issues such as the non-resolution of a number of social problems.

During this period, on the one hand, the negative consequences of the overly centralized administrative-command system, and on the other hand, the accumulation of social and economic problems became clearly visible. These problems aggravated interethnic relations, alongside all other spheres of society's

life. However, it would be wrong to look for the cause of the increased tension in interethnic relations only in the economic or social spheres.

The national policy of the totalitarian regime was based on the main principles of the Communist Party regarding the complete resolution of the national question and the "merging of all nations" in the country during the process of building a communist society. One of the clear manifestations of such a policy was aimed at artificially promoting multinationality. The idea was that the more multinational the republics were, the more favorable conditions would be created for the merging of nations. However, the growth of multinationality can serve as a positive factor only if it occurs within the bounds of natural-historical processes. Even then, only up to a certain limit, after which it begins to play a negative role. Historical experience shows that the isolation of one or another people never positively affects its development. However, the artificial promotion of multinationality through population migration resulted in damage to the distinctiveness of national culture, language, and customs in the republics.

This was clearly evident in Uzbekistan. Instead of serving the consolidation and numerical concentration of the Uzbek people, the national republic was used to promote multinationality. In Uzbekistan, representatives of 91 nationalities were recorded in 1926; this figure was 113 in 1959, 123 in 1979, and 127 in 1989. The reduction in attention to the national question did not fail to show its effect later. By the late 80s, the introduction of principles like freedom of speech, openness (glasnost), and democracy into the life of society by the "Perestroika" policy clearly demonstrated the state of interethnic relations. Interethnic conflicts and clashes flared up in many regions (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Chechnya, Fergana) [2, b.55].

In the initial years of "Perestroika," no serious changes occurred in national policy. The situation could have changed after the political leadership of the republic was replaced in 1988, but the new republican leader R. Nishonov failed to grasp the changed situation in the country. Crucially, he could not see the sprouts of national awakening that had emerged in people's minds under the influence of "Perestroika." The simplification of national problems was characteristic not only of the leadership of Uzbekistan; political leaders at the center also did not pay sufficient attention to the national question during the years of "Perestroika." The establishment of the Soviet Union was presented as one of the greatest achievements of socialism, as an alliance of equal nations and peoples tempered by the test of time. The developing national-democratic movements in the republics were viewed as manifestations of "national egoism and localism."

The aggravation of interethnic relations in the country forced the government to approach this issue with greater attention. On September 20, 1989, a special Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU dedicated to national problems was held. Soon, the requirements of the Central Committee of the CPSU for the XXVIII Party Congress were put forward, in which national problems occupied a central place [3, b. 27-40].

On the eve of independence, the further tragic turn of socio-economic conditions, the elimination of the complete disruption of established economic, industrial, and financial ties, and preventing the escalation of unemployment became an extremely vital necessity. That is, during this period, such problems were relevant not only in the territory of our country but also in the territories of neighboring republics. Among them, the following social, economic, political, and spiritual problems were pressing in the 90s [4, b.116]:

- During this period, the population of Uzbekistan was 15,379,400 people, of whom 8 million 800 thousand people were low-income, meaning that while 85 rubles of wages were necessary for survival, they received 75 rubles;
- The republic ranked 12th among the union republics in terms of gross social product per capita and occupied one of the last places in terms of consumption of basic types of products;
- 1 million people were unemployed, there were 240 thousand landless families, and 60% of schools and hospitals were located in unsuitable buildings. 70% of raw materials were exported, and 70% of finished products were imported;
- Despite the presence of various nationalities and ethnic groups in the republic, cultural, educational, newspaper, journal, and book publications were written only in Russian, and television broadcasts were also conducted in Russian [5, b. 4-5].

In a word, critical problems such as the lack of even the most basic necessities for living, let alone the comprehensive harmonious development of the individual and his spiritual growth as a person, had accumulated and become extremely widespread in our country. That is, the accumulated complex circle of problems mutually necessitated each other and led to the intensification of contradictions in the social environment. For example, the repressive policy of the ruling Soviet state served to maintain the power of the authoritarian ideology in society. This did not serve to protect the people; instead, fear and panic based on absolute obedience spread widely among people. As a result, the increase in uncertainty about the future fueled internal dissatisfaction. As a consequence of the widespread repressive policy, a critical situation emerged in our country on the eve of independence, where a small spark could ignite a blaze. In particular, the following critical situations existed during this period:

- Increased uncertainty about the future;
- A situation where a small spark could immediately ignite a fire;
- The ruling repressive policy;
- The preservation of the power of the authoritarian ideology;
- Widespread fear and panic;
- Low spirits among the people.

It is known that by the late 1980s, the processes of economic, socio-political crisis in the former USSR intensified, and uncertainty prevailed. In turn, the mistake committed several years earlier by the supporters of the former regime, resulting from the forced relocation of nations, came to light during this period. As a result, the problems that had filled the people's cup of patience led to social upheavals and national conflicts. Unfortunately, such negative developments did not bypass Uzbekistan. The end of May and the beginning of June 1989 saw the entire Fergana region engulfed in the flames of riots and turmoil. From May 23, 1989, extraordinary incidents occurred in many districts and cities of the Fergana region. It can be said that such tragedies had never occurred before in the history of our country. Our people, famous since ancient times for their qualities of tolerance, hospitality, compassion, and kindness, have never been hostile to anyone or raised a hand. If we turn to history for an example, we should recall the tireless struggle of our great ancestor Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, who established a state on the land of India, to preserve peace and mutual harmony among the various tribes and ethnic groups in that land. It is doubtless that such a consistent policy formed the basis of the traditions of mutual friendship, harmony, and national unity established on Indian soil.

In such a volatile situation, the First President of our Republic had to work on several fronts regarding the Fergana events alone - not to mention the many other problems in the republic - namely, in the political-theoretical, organizational-practical, and ideological spheres. In other words, he first had to assess why these events occurred and their roots based on profound political-theoretical thought; secondly, to identify the real criminals and the evil forces behind them; to solve the social problems clearly manifested by the Fergana events from an organizational-practical point of view and restore people's faith in truth and the future; thirdly, to convey the real truth about the Fergana events to the world through the high tribunes of the USSR, and to protect the honor and dignity of our people. It is not difficult to imagine that fulfilling such tasks was extremely difficult from the perspective of human physical and intellectual capabilities, especially in the conditions of the former totalitarian regime, when pressure, persecution, and oppression intensified from all sides. The steadfastness of the republican leader uplifted the spirit of the people, who were oppressed by baseless accusations and slander and were in turmoil due to various threats.

Considering the existing social situation in the republic, the leader of Uzbekistan openly stated his position on the events that occurred. Of course, as the leader of the republic, Islam Karimov could have familiarized himself with the information about the causes and consequences of the Fergana events and adopted the necessary decisions while sitting in his office. However, the principle of conducting business without leaving the office was completely alien to Islam Karimov. He considered it his life's credo and highest human duty to directly feel the hot breath of life, to be with the people in good times and bad, and to always share the pain and joy of the country and its people. The First President of the Republic spoke with passion, expressing the genuine truth with great pain and courage, developed practical solutions for eliminating the consequences of the tragedy, and consistently implemented them. In particular, in major conferences held in Tashkent and Moscow, as well as in press statements, he stood firm on this issue and specifically emphasized the following thoughts: "The conscience of the Uzbek people is clear. The Fergana events did not occur by the will of the Uzbek people. No matter what color anyone paints these events with senseless and malicious motives, history will certainly issue its just verdict. Internationalism, hospitality, kindness, and generosity of heart have always been inherent qualities of the Uzbek people. Our people have never been hostile towards other peoples. This is proven by many examples taken from our ancient and modern history." Such truthful and fervent words provided comfort to our people, lifting their spirits which had been bowed by slander and accusations. The events that took place in Osh, Uzgen, and Jalal-Abad regions of neighboring Kyrgyzstan also influenced the aggravation of the socio-political situation in Uzbekistan in the early 1990s. The blame for the escalation of national conflicts into bloody clashes did not lie with the two peoples who have been blood relatives since ancient times. These events were the burdensome consequences of the national policy pursued by the Soviet government. Following the Osh events, the Soviet of Nationalities of the USSR Supreme Soviet, upon the instruction of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, had a group of USSR People's Deputies led by G.K. Kryuchkov study the situation in the Osh region. As a result, it was stressed that the political leadership of the region and the Kirghiz SSR were responsible for the conflicts [6, b.]. The events in Fergana, Buka, Parkent, Namangan, and Osh cannot be viewed as separate incidents. They were all a continuation and an integral part of the intensifying socio-political crisis throughout the country.

In conclusion, we can say that interethnic relations in our country on the eve of independence were aggravated due to the short-sighted policy pursued by the former authoritarian Soviet regime. The ineffectiveness of the economic system created by the Soviet regime also played a major role in this regard. The center's attempts to merge nations and create a new, artificial, and cultureless Soviet nation were practically transformed into a policy of "Russification." This had an extremely negative impact on interethnic relations in a country inhabited by representatives of various nationalities.

The national and religious tolerance of the peoples of Central Asia, as a social and historical phenomenon and the beginning of the history of their spirituality and culture, has been integrated into the depth of centuries, having passed through thousands of years of spiritual development stages. Representatives of many nations and ethnic groups have resided in harmony on the territory of Uzbekistan since ancient times. The absence of national conflicts among them for centuries demonstrates the age-old tolerance and high spirituality of our people.

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