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## Local Government in Uzbekistan

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### Synonyms

Decentralization in Uzbekistan; Local government in Central Asia; Public administration in Uzbekistan; Subnational government in Uzbekistan

### Introduction

Uzbekistan became an independent state in 1991 following the demise of the Soviet Union. Coming on the heels of a global discourse on good governance and decentralization, Uzbekistan embarked on the highly complex task of reforming its public administration system. The implementation of these reforms, however, proved to be a daunting task, since the country had to deal with its Soviet legacy and its internal power structures and contradictions: weak state institutions, poorly developed national identities, and

entrenched subnational political networks (cf., Ilkhamov 2004; Markowitz 2008; Melvin 2004).

Local government is one of the most problematic areas in Uzbekistan where the failure of the reform initiatives is quite evident. This chapter delineates the processes involved and explores the context, problems, quality, and trajectories of local governance in Uzbekistan. More specifically, it addresses the following two questions: (a) What are the responsibilities of local governments and do they carry them out in an adequate and efficient manner? (b) How do local governments involve communities and their organizations in the governing process in terms of the principles of good governance, such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, voice, democracy, and accountability? In doing so, the paper examines four conditions: contextual, structural, institutional, and human resource. These conditions are considered to be factors that can account for the capacity of local governments in Uzbekistan.

The rest of the chapter proceeds as follows: the next section describes the internal structure of local governments, which will be instructive in understanding the conditions under which they function in Uzbekistan. This is followed by the presentation of a brief overview of the tasks and service delivery responsibilities of local governments. The financial conditions and actual service delivery capacity of local governments are then discussed. The section after that examines the relations between the central and local

government, followed by concluding remarks on the main trends and challenges local governments face. Suggestions on areas for governance reform are also provided.

## The Internal Structure of Local Governments

In Uzbekistan, the local government consists of a local state administration (administrative body) and an elected local council (legislative body) at the regional (oblast) and district (raion) levels. Representatives are appointed/elected for a period of 5 years. The local administration represents the executive and regulatory bodies of the state at the regional, district, or city/town levels and implements the policies of the president and central government in the provinces. All the heads of the local state administrations are appointed by the central government, subject to [symbolical] approval by the corresponding local councils (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). The president appoints regional (oblast level) governors, who in turn appoint district and city/town governors that come under regional subordination. Thus, the district and city governors are accountable to the regional governor, who in turn is accountable to the president. This means that local governors often experience double or even triple subordination, being accountable to the regional governor, the central government, and the president.

The local councils, running alongside the local state administrations, are the primary local legislative bodies. The council representatives are elected by the residents of the respective administrative-territorial units through general and direct vote (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). As elected bodies, the local councils are expected to express and realize the will of the citizens in their respective administrative-territorial units. At least in theory, local councils can exert some influence over their administrative bodies. However, this is not the case in practice as the heads of the local state administrations enjoy absolute power in the management of local affairs (e.g., Popa and Munteanu 2001). Since all the governors are appointed, the local councils

cannot exert significant influence on them. Even though governors periodically report to their local councils on the current situation of the territory, this process is mainly symbolic in nature (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). This is because the governors of the regional, city, or district state administrations simultaneously exercise executive authority and serve as local council chairmen. This means it is very difficult to distinguish between the functions of the local state administration and the local self-government bodies, since the same individual (i.e., the governor) heads both branches of power.

In addition to the regional and district state administrations, there are sub-district level governance institutions – mahalla committees – in towns and rural areas. Mahalla committees were part of the state farms, collective farms, and enterprises during the Soviet era, but shortly after independence, Uzbek authorities revamped these institutions, assigning them new legal status as “local self-government bodies of citizens” (Giffen et al. 2005). Mahalla committees assist district/town administrations in implementing local development projects, collecting taxes, administering social welfare programs, maintaining and repairing roads, disposing of waste, ensuring security and order, removing garbage, maintaining playgrounds and sports fields, and many other tasks that are of local importance (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001; Urinboyev 2011). Regarding the financing and autonomy of these sub-district self-government institutions vis-a-vis the higher-level local state administrations, they are fully dependent on budget allocations from the latter and regularly report to the head of the district or city/town administrations. The chairmen and secretaries of the mahalla committees are salaried state officials. This means that mahalla committees do not have any real capacity to act as sites of local democracy and participation but merely serve as sub-district extensions of the local state administrations.

However, it should be noted that some form of informal autonomy can be observed at the level of the informal/social mahalla. Hence, there is a need to distinguish between the mahalla

committees (administrative mahalla) and the informal mahallas (social mahalla). The Uzbek people usually refer to the chairmen of the mahalla committees as the “eyes and ears of the local government” (“quloq” in the Uzbek language), given the fact that they serve the interests of the local government. The leaders of the social mahallas, on the other hand, are elected by mahalla residents during informal gatherings in mosques or teahouses (guzar). They work pro bono for the community and represent the interests of the mahalla people. The social mahallas function informally and autonomously and can thus be regarded as a genuine citizen self-government institution (Urinboyev 2014, 2018). They offer a community-based alternative dispute resolution mechanism and provide a space for informal governance of everyday life and social relations. The analysis of scholarly literature shows that for many Uzbeks, social mahallas are more legitimate and easily accessible than the formal state institutions (Aminova and Jegers 2011; Masaru 2006; Sievers 2002; Urinboyev 2011, 2013a, b).

## Tasks and Service Delivery Responsibilities of Local Governments

The tasks decentralized to local governments in Uzbekistan include environmental protection, prevention of natural and technological accidents, fire protection, public sanitation, public order and security, local economic and social development, culture, tourism, sports, maintenance of leisure facilities, communal services (e.g., water, gas, electricity, heat, waste management, sewage, engineering infrastructures), construction, maintenance and local road repair, public transport, employment and job creation support, and the development of small and medium enterprises.

Almost all healthcare services are provided by the public authorities. The central government manages healthcare services through the regional, district, and city/town level healthcare offices of the Ministry of Health. Healthcare services are primarily financed by the central budget and administered by territorial structures of the

respective ministry. The local government is only responsible for the maintenance and renovation of healthcare institutions (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). Schooling is the joint responsibility of the central and local government in the sense that the local offices of the Ministry of Education pay teachers’ wages and oversee administrative control; other expenditures such as school maintenance are included in the local government budget (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001).

Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan where local governments are responsible mainly for providing social assistance to needy families, the mahalla committees (administrative mahalla) in Uzbekistan are responsible for the administration and targeting of state social welfare benefits, such as child and maternity benefits, and social assistance to low-income families, families with children under 16, and single mothers with children under 2 (Coudouel and Marnie 1999; Micklewright and Marnie 2005). Funding for these programs is established centrally as part of the consolidated budget expenditures, which in turn are transferred to the mahalla committees. The remaining social protection programs (e.g., pensions, veterans of the war benefits) are the responsibility of the district/city level units of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001).

## Financial Conditions and Actual Service Delivery Capacity of Local Governments

One of the most important criteria used by the citizens to assess the performance of local governments is the quality and accessibility of local public services (Popa and Munteanu 2001). However, there are only a few studies with data on citizens’ satisfaction with local government performance in Uzbekistan. This is because Uzbekistan has long been a heavily authoritarian and closed country, making it difficult for local and foreign organizations and researchers to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the local government in the country. Neema Noori’s

(2006) study of decentralization processes in Uzbekistan is one of the few in this respect. As Noori argues, decentralization has had a negative impact on public service delivery in Uzbekistan because it was not accompanied by the corresponding resources and consequently worsened the quality and accessibility of public services. Hence, the central government has delegated numerous tasks and service delivery responsibilities to the local governments without providing adequate funding (Kandiyoti 2007; Noori 2006). One of the key challenges to improve the performance of local governments in Uzbekistan is to bridge the gap between their economic and social functions and the meagre financial means available for their implementation.

The healthcare provision situation is also problematic. In Uzbekistan, the healthcare system is financed by the state, which means medical services should be free of charge. However, the healthcare system is de facto private and highly reliant on informal forms of financing. Most patients have to make informal payments to medical professionals in order to receive proper medical treatment, even though the public authorities claim that citizens are entitled to free medical care. Local governments do not have sufficient resources to maintain adequately the healthcare infrastructures, the majority of which were built during the Soviet period.

A similar situation can also be observed in the field of education. Due to their vulnerable financial situation, local governments do not have sufficient resources to maintain local schools and provide an adequate number of books or to build modern sports facilities. The parents usually cover these expenditures.

These problems can be largely explained by the fact that the local governments in Uzbekistan have limited financial autonomy and are strongly dependent on the central government (Ergashev et al. 2006; Sievers 2002; Urinboyev 2015). Local budgets mainly consist of transfers from the central government and local tax revenues. Local budget planning is centralized and closely tied to the national budget. This implies that central government bodies determined the revenue bases of

the local budgets. The local governments cannot independently establish tax rates or collect their own revenues through local taxes, with the exception of some insignificant local fees, taxes, and duties, such as a land tax. National budget funds are redistributed among different regions by deducting budget surpluses from the regions that perform well and making allocations in the form of subventions, subsidies, or equalization transfers to vulnerable regions that cannot cover their needs. The revenues collected from local taxes constitute a small portion of the local governments' revenues and are insufficient for covering even the basic expenses. Hence, the ability of local governments to raise their own revenues is considerably limited, and they remain dependent on transfers from the central government to fulfill their service delivery functions. Consequently, they neither enjoy fiscal autonomy nor do they receive transfers from the central government that are sufficient to meet their service delivery needs (Leschenko and Troschke 2006).

Due to the incapacity of the local government to address adequately the local needs, social mahallas have evolved to respond to the declining state capacity in the post-Soviet era, acting as a pseudo-local government entity. This means that people living in the same neighborhood (mahalla) pool their efforts and engage in mutual aid practices by exchanging labor, money, material goods, and services. Typical mutual aid practices include the community financing of constructing irrigation facilities, cleaning streets, asphaltting roads, building houses or mosques, organizing weddings, funerals and circumcision feasts, and many other services not provided by the local government.

## The Relations Between the Central and Local Government

The local government in Uzbekistan functions in a rather complex environment characterized by an authoritarian political culture, limited financial autonomy, and weak local legislative bodies. The power and functions between the central state agencies and local governments are



ambiguously distributed, which largely derives from the deficiencies in national laws that do not clearly specify the functions and powers across various tiers of the government. The central government bodies make most of the administrative decisions concerning district and regional public service delivery issues. In these bodies, a hierarchy of power starts at the ministry, followed by the ministry's main regional departments, and followed by the district or city units. Ministries control the daily activities of their territorial agencies and directly appoint their heads, in coordination with the governor, which implies that the territorial units of the ministries are accountable to their central bodies and thereby rarely coordinate with local governments.

Local councils, despite having official status as local legislative bodies, are in practice subordinated to the local state administrations. Hence, institutions of self-governance fulfill completely different functions and aims than the officially declared ones. This means that there is very little or no understanding of the true essence of local government reform in the country. As Abdukhalilov (2007) notes, in Uzbekistan, administrative reforms are often understood as a cutback in staff or an attempt to save money. More importantly, administrative reforms do not contain a single paragraph about the necessity to change the hierarchical norms and mentality of the managers.

Accordingly, Uzbekistan's public administration system can hardly be regarded as "decentralized" given that local governments are highly dependent on the central government at all levels – administratively, financially, and politically. Overdependence on the central government limits the ability of local governments to support local development. The malfunctioning local governments are mainly the outcome of a centralized government that does not delegate any real autonomy to local administrations (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). Under these circumstances political and civil servants at all levels do not feel any accountability to the citizens; rather, they try to meet the expectations of those who have the power and authority to hire them. Public participation in local politics is almost nonexistent, and

local elections are merely used to assert and legitimize the central government's influence in the periphery. Openness and transparency are not viewed as a norm in the day-to-day operations of the local administrations. Local government officials care less about informing people about their work or listening to their opinions on the level and quality of public services. They are chiefly concerned with fulfilling the orders and expectations of the central government.

## Concluding Remarks

As shown in the previous sections, the relationship between the local state administrations and the central government is often based on subordinate relations rather than on mutual cooperation. Local government reform is interpreted merely in terms of citizens' active participation in local government, but other key conditions for local self-government (i.e., autonomy of local self-government structures from the state) are largely neglected (Ilkhamov 2004; Urinboyev 2015). As the results demonstrate, the core challenge hindering local government reform in Uzbekistan comes from the persistence of authoritarian style administrative practices. Although there have been some local government reform initiatives in the country, they remain "on paper" and have little or no effect on the governance processes. In practice, the local governments continue to be subordinated to the central government in all public policy issues, be it education, taxation, health care, welfare, or agriculture. As a result, the local governments do not have any real capacity to adequately address the needs and concerns of citizens, as they are merely concerned with implementing centrally designed policies.

Another area of concern is financial autonomy. Since the local governments do not have a solid financial base and the important public policy decisions are made at the central government level, there is little or no possibility at the local level for citizens to voice their concerns about public goods and services. One visible consequence is the emergence of citizens' alternatives: informal coping strategies that are based on

mutual aid practices. These alternative strategies are short-term solutions that have little to do with local development issues and negatively influence the image and legitimacy of the central government. It is thus suggested that local government reform should go beyond official proclamations and rhetoric and grant more political and financial autonomy in practice.

## Cross-References

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- Governance in Tajikistan
- Local Government in Kazakhstan
- Local Government in Uzbekistan
- Public Administration in Kyrgyzstan
- Public Sector Reforms in Central Asia

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