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The **PAST,**  
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# Public Administration Developments in Post-Soviet Central Asia

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## Introduction

In the West, everybody is now talking about the economic and financial crisis. The term “crisis” has become a buzzword within both academic and policy communities. There is an enormous upsurge of scholarly interest in the effects of this crisis on public-administration systems and the role that public administration plays in these processes. The underlying belief is that the public administration through the knowledge, competence, professionalism, commitment, strategic foresight and the action of its human resources can play a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of the crisis. The NISPAcee region is no exception to these debates. It is apparent that the current crisis has, and will continue to have, a huge impact on patterns of governance in the NISPAcee region, thereby bringing fresh attention to the issue of the role of public administration in preventing such crises. This might imply that each country is compelled to reexamine and reform its institutionalized paradigm of public administration and governance.

It should be noted that not all countries in the NISPAcee region are affected by the crisis. The issue of crisis loses its importance when it comes to the five “stans” of the NISPAcee region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The “crisis” is not the main issue of concern in Central Asian public-administration debates, since Central Asian countries have been minimally affected by the global economic crisis. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, all Central Asian countries are recording GDP growth up to 8–10 percent annually. Thus, public-administration debates in Central Asian countries have little to do with the interplay between the economic crisis and public-administration systems; rather, the greatest emphasis of public-administration debates in post-Soviet Central Asia has been on issues of authoritarianism, kleptocracy and corruption, clans and regional patronage networks, persistence of administrative command methods, ethnic-diversity management, and religious fundamentalism and extremism. While public-administration reforms in Central and Eastern Europe were motivated by EU accession incentives, there was no real incentive for post-Soviet Central Asian governments to reform their public-administration systems. Although significant differences do exist among the Central Asian states, the analysis of public-administration developments since 1991 shows that Central Asian coun-

tries have made limited progress toward establishing democratic governance and rule of law. I will elaborate more on these in subsequent sections.

## **Main issues of concern in Central Asian public administration debates**

### **The resilience of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, leaders of each of the Central Asian countries declared their strong commitment to democracy, rule of law and human rights, and adopted a constitutionally limited, representative form of government in accordance with international standards. However, many commentators now argue that Central Asian countries made little progress in promoting good governance and rule of law, and that many formal institutions of government have achieved merely a showcase quality. Rather, policy strategies adopted by the five new governments of Central Asia led to significantly different policy outcomes and strengthened authoritarian practices in the region. While the nature and specificity of authoritarian regimes differ from one Central Asian country to another, their basic features are similar across the region with regard to human-rights abuses, ill-treatment of dissidents and opposition, intolerance for religious, ethnic and territorial differences, etc. In this respect, much of the literature regarding Central Asia tends to treat authoritarian practices as one of the main barriers for public administration reforms in the region (Kubicek 1998; Luong 2002; March 2003; Melvin 2004; Noori 2006; Starr 2006; Perlman and Gleason 2007; Collins 2009).

### **Clans and regional patronage networks**

“Clans” and “patronage networks” are commonly used terms in Central Asian public administration debates. As Joel S. Migdal (2001) observed, clans are one of the traditional social structures that vie for power to set rules and deplete state’s organizational prowess in many developing countries. Although the Soviet state was able to diminish the political influence of clans and regional patronage networks, the post-Soviet transition period has reinvigorated an informal system of governance. As soon as the Soviet system collapsed, clans emerged as strong political actors, thereby deeply penetrating into formal arenas of the state. Thus, “clan politics” – the politics of informal competition and deal-making between clans in pursuit of clan interests – has become a buzzword in academic and policy circles. A growing body of scholarly work on Central Asia asserts that public-administration developments in the region are highly influenced by informal politi-

cal processes that evolve around relations “between clans and regimes” (Luong 2002, 2004; Collins 2003, 2004, 2009; Ilkhamov 2004, 2007; Starr 2006).

### **Omnipresence of corruption and kleptocracy**

Many commentators now argue that Central Asian states have made little progress in promoting the rule of law and good governance, and that corruption is rooted in systemic features of political regimes. In this regard, one of the main issues of concern in Central Asian public-administration debates is corruption. According to the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, released annually by Transparency International (TI), Central Asian countries are among the 10 most corrupt countries in the world (TI 2011). Also, the “control of corruption” indicator of the *World Bank Governance Studies* shows an extremely high level of corruption in Central Asian countries (Libman 2008).

Understandably, post-Soviet Central Asia has been the subject of a great surge in academic research and writing on corruption. Much of the literature tends to concentrate on macro-level topics and state-centered approaches, focusing on kleptocratic elites in the upper echelons of the state organization, malfunctioning public-administration structures, administratively-commanded economic policies, inefficient post-Soviet agricultural reforms, corrupt law-enforcement agencies, and inadequate ways of dealing with corruption on the part of state authorities (Luong 2004; Ergashev et al. 2006; Wegerich 2006; Kandiyoti 2007; Trevisani 2007; Markowitz 2008). The bulk of these authors argue that the struggles among these various state actors to gain control over scarce resources have resulted in contradictory state policies, thereby making corruption and bribery a “survival” strategy among ordinary citizens. At the same time, these studies also claim that corruption and bribery may be practiced by state elites themselves for more predatory reasons, which have nothing to do with “survival”. Another portrait gleaned from scholarly works suggests that it is the penetration of clans and regional patronage networks into official structures that deplete the state’s organizational powers and cause corruption and inefficiencies in public-administration system (Kubicek 1998; Luong 2002; Pashkun 2003; Collins 2006; Ilkhamov 2007). There is also a penchant to explain the ubiquitousness of corruption in Central Asian countries as an outcome of its communist past (Staples 1993; Gleason 1995; Ergashev et al. 2006).

### **Ethnic diversity management**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, all five Central Asian countries have launched their national-identity projects in pursuit of legitimacy and popu-



lar support. Although national-identity policies helped Central Asian states in their transition from communism to market economy, these strategies led to the resurgence of nationalism. In this regard, issues of ethnicity, nationalism and statehood are among the most pressing issues in Central Asian public-administration debates. Recent ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan shows that there is an urgent need for ethnic-diversity management. Hence, democratic governance of multi-ethnic communities is one of the main issues of concern in Central Asian public administration debates.

## **Optimal scenario for public administration developments in Central Asia**

There was a widespread euphoria in the 1990s in Central Asia and the outside world that the introduction of Western-style political institutions and a Western-style legal system would promote democratic governance in post-Soviet Central Asian states. All five Central Asian states have proclaimed the creation of a secular democratic society based on the ideals of democracy, human rights and social justice. The Western world and international financial institutions have shown their strong willingness to support democratic transformations in post-Soviet Central Asia through financing and initiating innumerable democracy, market-economy and human-rights projects. The underlying belief that Western intervention, as a whole, has a positive effect on the democratization and economic development of the Central Asian region has rarely been questioned. However, the analysis of the two decades of public-administration developments shows that the Central Asian countries have made little success in reforming their public-administration systems. Rather, conditional loans, technical assistance and other types of aid from the West have not been means of public-administration reform, but have actually preserved many of the existing informal structures and regional patronage networks. These informal networks, which regained momentum in the post-Soviet period, have been reinforced by the economic, political and normative resources provided by the Western donor community. Public-administration reforms have often been hampered by the inflow of foreign aid. Due to the corrupt nature and illegitimacy of recipient regimes, Western intervention runs the risk of undermining the credibility of the public-administration reform process in the region. From this perspective, any Western intervention in Central Asia should be made with awareness of the fact that it is not the state capacity, but mainly the social structure that determines the final outcome of public-administration reforms. Hence, progress in public administration could not be achieved by changes in the formal institutions of government, but the ef-

ficient functioning of these institutions would be dependent on the strength of social structures.

### **Social structure of Central Asia**

Despite Soviet modernization policies, conventions and habits of traditional society are still strong in Central Asia. The traditional structure of Central Asian societies has been more strongly reinforced in the post-Soviet period due to the national-identity politics of new Central Asian governments. Bonds linking individuals to their birthplace, ethnicity, kinship and community remain strong in Central Asia, even for city dwellers. Networks of solidarity are based on kinship, regional affiliations, ethnicity and patron-client relations. It is the social norm in Central Asia that the individual shares his economic resources and political influence with his social networks and kin once they become available. In this regard, these networks of solidarity prevail in politics, business and social life in Central Asia, since such a collective nature of society limits the scope and penchant for individual choice. Therefore, maintaining loyalty and respect for such networks and kin often comes at the expense of formal structures, thereby leading to an omnipresence of corruption and rent-seeking behavior in formal arenas.

Social structure of this kind contributes to the emergence of informal, regional groups such as clans and regional patronage networks that continually render influence on public-administration developments. Although these social structures might seem like “mafia-like organizations” to Western observers, they are inalienable part of political processes in Central Asia. This pinpoints the key feature of social structure in Central Asia – collectivism. While the cornerstone of the Western model is individualism and self-interest; the cornerstone of the Central Asian model is collectivism, loyalty and obligation. In other words, the sense of community in the Western world is based on the free choice of individuals, whereas in traditional Central Asian societies collective interests prevail over individual choice. Western public-administration initiatives in this respect should be sensitive to the collective nature of social and political life in Central Asia.

There has been very little interest in using the untapped potential of the mosque-based social networks of Central Asia. It is apparent that there are advantages and disadvantages associated with relying on ethnic, kinship and religious organizations. The disadvantage of such traditional structures is that they can strengthen age and gender hierarchies and exacerbate already existing status-based relations. However, given the enormous influence of social structure on political processes, it is important not to ignore their influence and to incorporate them where useful and possible. Despite its flaws, the incorporation of tra-

ditional *mahalla* structures into the public-administration system in Uzbekistan represents one example of public-administration reform. Since the two decades of Western public-administration interventions have made limited progress in Central Asian states, there is a growing belief in academic communities that the respect for traditional forms of association can bring about success in public-administration reforms. One possible inference is that social and cultural factors seem to be more influential than institutional factors in affecting administrative change in Central Asia.

## **Welfare reforms – a pathway to genuine public administration reforms?**

Although Central Asian states continue to enjoy economic growth in times of global economic crisis, few Central Asians reaped the rewards. The continuing flow of labor migrants from Central Asia to Russia indicates that economic and social policies of Central Asian countries have failed to secure the basic needs of citizens. These developments might have far-reaching repercussions for state-society relations in Central Asia, leading to a legitimacy crisis of the states.

As Kamp (2004) noted, Central Asian societies not only stay dependent on the state for their basic needs, but they continue to believe that the state's primary role is to provide for them. However, due to the restricted extent to which the Central Asian states could provide social welfare to their populations, the social contract between the states and their population became very strained. As post-Soviet Central Asian states have retreated from offering social-welfare services to society, so is society retreating from loyalty to current governments, evidenced by increased popular disobedience to the (secular) legal system, growing informal economy and rise of radical religious movements. The Western European development experience in the postwar period shows that the formation of politically stable democratic nation states and the development of welfare states was closely correlated. Since Central Asian states continually record strong economic growth, even in times of crisis, one might ponder whether the strong welfare measures could serve as a pathway to genuine public-administration reforms in Central Asia.

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