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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

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

64 **The Internal Structure of Local** 65 **Governments**

66 In Uzbekistan, the local government consists of
67 a local state administration (administrative body)
68 and an elected local council (legislative body) at
69 the regional (oblast) and district (raion) levels.
70 Representatives are appointed/elected for a period
71 of 5 years. The local administration represents
72 the executive and regulatory bodies of the state
73 at the regional, district, or city/town levels and
74 implements the policies of the president and central
75 government in the provinces. All the heads of
76 the local state administrations are appointed by
77 the central government, subject to [symbolical]
78 approval by the corresponding local councils
79 (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). The president
80 appoints regional (oblast level) governors, who in
81 turn appoint district and city/town governors that
82 come under regional subordination. Thus, the district
83 and city governors are accountable to the regional
84 governor, who in turn is accountable to the president.
85 This means that local governors
86 often experience double or even triple subordination,
87 being accountable to the regional governor,
88 the central government, and the president.

89 The local councils, running alongside the local
90 state administrations, are the primary local legislative
91 bodies. The council representatives are
92 elected by the residents of the respective
93 administrative-territorial units through general
94 and direct vote (Bektemirov and Rahimov
95 2001). As elected bodies, the local councils are
96 expected to express and realize the will of the
97 citizens in their respective administrative-
98 territorial units. At least in theory, local councils
99 can exert some influence over their administrative
100 bodies. However, this is not the case in practice
101 as the heads of the local state administrations
102 enjoy absolute power in the management of local
103 affairs (e.g., Popa and Munteanu 2001). Since all
104 the governors are appointed, the local councils

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

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

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

153 committees (administrative mahalla) and the
 154 informal mahallas (social mahalla). The Uzbek
 155 people usually refer to the chairmen of the
 156 mahalla committees as the “eyes and ears of the
 157 local government” (“quloq” in the Uzbek lan-
 158 guage), given the fact that they serve the interests
 159 of the local government. The leaders of the social
 160 mahallas, on the other hand, are elected by
 161 mahalla residents during informal gatherings in
 162 mosques or teahouses (guzar). They work pro
 163 bono for the community and represent the inter-
 164 ests of the mahalla people. The social mahallas
 165 function informally and autonomously and can
 166 thus be regarded as a genuine citizen self-
 167 government institution (Urinboyev 2014, 2018).
 168 They offer a community-based alternative dispute
 169 resolution mechanism and provide a space for
 170 informal governance of everyday life and social
 171 relations. The analysis of scholarly literature
 172 shows that for many Uzbeks, social mahallas are
 173 more legitimate and easily accessible than the
 174 formal state institutions (Aminova and Jegers
 175 2011; Masaru 2006; Sievers 2002; Urinboyev
 176 2011, 2013a, b).

177 **Tasks and Service Delivery** 178 **Responsibilities of Local Governments**

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

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

198 respective ministry. The local government is
 199 only responsible for the maintenance and renova-
 200 tion of healthcare institutions (Bektemirov and
 201 Rahimov 2001). Schooling is the joint responsi-
 202 bility of the central and local government in the
 203 sense that the local offices of the Ministry of
 204 Education pay teachers’ wages and oversee
 205 administrative control; other expenditures such
 206 as school maintenance are included in the local
 207 government budget (Bektemirov and Rahimov
 208 2001).

209 Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and
 210 Tajikistan where local governments are responsi-
 211 ble mainly for providing social assistance to
 212 needy families, the mahalla committees
 213 (administrative mahalla) in Uzbekistan are
 214 responsible for the administration and targeting
 215 of state social welfare benefits, such as child
 216 and maternity benefits, and social assistance to
 217 low-income families, families with children
 218 under 16, and single mothers with children under
 219 2 (Coudouel and Marnie 1999; Micklewright and
 220 Marnie 2005). Funding for these programs is
 221 established centrally as part of the consolidated
 222 budget expenditures, which in turn are transferred
 223 to the mahalla committees. The remaining social
 224 protection programs (e.g., pensions, veterans of
 225 the war benefits) are the responsibility of the dis-
 226 trict/city level units of the Ministry of Labor and
 227 Social Protection (Bektemirov and Rahimov
 228 2001).

229 **Financial Conditions and Actual Service** 230 **Delivery Capacity of Local Governments**

231 One of the most important criteria used by the
 232 citizens to assess the performance of local
 233 governments is the quality and accessibility of
 234 local public services (Popa and Munteanu 2001).
 235 However, there are only a few studies with data on
 236 citizens’ satisfaction with local government
 237 performance in Uzbekistan. This is because
 238 Uzbekistan has long been a heavily authoritarian
 239 and closed country, making it difficult for local
 240 and foreign organizations and researchers to eval-
 241 uate the performance and effectiveness of the
 242 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

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

437 Cross-References

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