

# Civil Society Reforms in Uzbekistan

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*The article is devoted to the study of ongoing civil society reforms in Uzbekistan under the new President – Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has presented a flagship program known as the Strategy of Actions on the five priority areas for midterm development of the country. Enhancing the role of civil society institutions in public life through improving the activities and capacity of non-governmental organizations, developing and introducing effective mechanisms for public engagement in all levels of governance, strengthening the institutional framework, ensuring the effective operation of civil society institutions, and foster their initiative in exercising public engagement over the activities of state bodies are considered as some of the main directions and priority objectives the Strategy of Actions. The article aims to analyze the effectiveness, progress, and prospects of current civil society reforms in Uzbekistan and discuss the main challenges of civil society institutions to ensure productive cooperation between all participants of society's political and social life.*

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Upon Shavkat Mirziyoyev's election as President of Uzbekistan in 2016, the role of a robust civil society became the cornerstone of development for a new period in the country's history. Radical reforms have embraced all aspects of Uzbekistan society's political and social life – with NGOs and civil society institutions the locus for reimagining the state's role in our lives.

With this purpose in mind, President Mirziyoyev presented a flagship program known as the Strategy of Actions where he outlines the five priority areas for the country's midterm development: enhancing the role played by civil society institutions in public life, mainly through the media, improving the activities and capacity of non-governmental organizations, developing and introducing effective mechanisms for public engagement in all levels of governance, strengthening the institutional framework, primarily through legal structures, to ensure the effective operation of civil society institutions, support of those institutions, and foster their initiative in exercising public engagement over the activities of state bodies.

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Public engagement in the context of the changes underway in Uzbekistan means a constant discourse between state institutions and the people they are obligated to serve. Only then do we make decisions on critical socio-political issues. We provide ample opportunities for the active participation of non-governmental, non-profit organizations in the social protection of the population. Through these means, we will strengthen public health, ameliorate environmental concerns, provide a balanced education for our youth, increase citizens' medical and legal knowledge, among many other reforms. As a result, we have seen a considerable increase in non-governmental, non-profit organizations, and other civil society institutions activities following in the words of the President, "... it is not the people should serve the state, but the state must serve the people" (Tulyakov, 2020).

In particular, because we submit draft laws, decrees, resolutions, and other normative legal acts for public discussion and examination before adoption, we often avoid the emergence of problems, whether intentional or not, at an early stage in development. The media and social media often play an essential role in fostering public criticism of government agencies and public officials.

In turn, we created Virtual and People's Receptions of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to ensure human rights and interests, establish a dialogue with people, carefully study and resolve problems and people's needs (Norma, 2018). These structures form a mechanism for in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of both state-run and executive management efforts. We can monitor local issues through objective criteria and assess their activities, thus holding responsible state institutions and officials accountable to society. To further strengthen the legislative basis for accommodating grievances, the Law "On Appeals of Individuals and Legal Entities" was adopted in a new iteration of legislative activity (Lex.uz, 2017).

Today, People's receptions in all regions, cities, and districts have switched to an active system of identifying and solving problems through door-to-door visits to families (Lex.uz, 2019). Through this grassroots effort, we ensure transparency of direct dialogue with the population, identifying solutions to issues at the local level while protecting individuals and legal entities' rights, freedoms, and legal interests. People's receptions are empowered to conduct systematic studies of state bodies. Based upon their conclusions, they then introduce submissions to state bodies for consideration. Many of those submissions have proposed disciplinary action against officials who have broken the law, including their dismissal.

In 2020 alone, the President's virtual reception and People's receptions received about 1.2 million applications. As a result, the information and eye-witness testimonies provided by the People's Receptions of the President, 752 senior officials who did not work according to our system's guidelines were brought to justice (Yangi O'zbekiston, 2021). Recently, we observe a trend where all ministries have adopted virtual portals on their websites to receive applications and complaints from citizens. The expansion of this system has meant timely resolution of emerging issues.

Furthermore, responsible officials at all levels, working on the ground in the mahallas, identify gaps in improving the population's living standards, gather the general opinion of their citizens regarding reforms, and organize their efforts on this basis (Gov.uz, 2021). Also, the Government has formed a system for organizing regular community, face-to-face receptions with the Presidential Administration officials, ministries and agencies, Khokims of regions, cities, and districts in the outlying regions. In 2020 alone, there were held more than 19 thousand such field receptions. Measures were taken to solve more than 124 thousand issues from approximately 120 thousand population representatives (Rafiqov, 2021).

When drafting annual state programs within the framework of the tasks defined by the Strategy of Actions, officials closely study and consider topical issues raised by the population. We prioritize longstanding problems, proposals submitted by civil society institutions and non-governmental organizations, and critical analysis brought forth by the media and social media networks. After completing a vetting process, a draft program is presented for public discussion. It is adopted and sent for implementation only after considering the opinions, proposals, and recommendations of ordinary people, experts, and representatives of international organizations (Development Strategy Center, 2020).

In the renewed Uzbekistan, every individual holds the constitutional right to freedom of thought, speech, and belief. Their right to search, receive and disseminate information through their interests is held inviolate, an achievement rightfully acknowledged by the international community (Asrorov, 2020). In particular, under the President's insistence, state bodies opened their "closed doors" and ensured transparency in their activities. The President regularly follows social networks, national and foreign media, and other sources about the societal problems that concern the public. In due course, he sometimes reprimands responsible leaders who are indifferent to resolving these issues. He sometimes applies disciplinary sanctions, even releases them from office, and calls on civil society institutions to be uncompromising in these processes (Review.uz, 2020).

Under the initiative of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, public officials introduced effective mechanisms of this institution into the law "On public control" adopted in 2018 (Lex.uz, 2018). This law regulates Government and Governmental organizations' relations with citizens, citizens' self-government bodies, non-governmental, non-profit organizations, and the media in organizing and furthering the public discourse over the implementation of legislative acts. Also, by the Decree of the President, Public Councils were created as branches of state bodies. These councils are called upon to exercise a mechanism of accountability over a state body and its officials on implementing adopted regulations, programs, agreements, contracts, projects, and programs implemented within the social partnership framework. Besides, these councils take an active part in systematic monitoring and comprehensive analysis of public opinion on the activities of a state body on the most critical issues affecting the rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of citizens, the development and implementation of state programs, and other programs in the field of combating corruption. Thus, accountability to the public is essential for building a stable and free civil society in the new Uzbekistan. Accordingly, organizing fruitful cooperation between state and public organizations and ensuring the effectiveness of reforms is the core of the updated policy.

One must openly admit that although there are about 9,200 non-governmental, non-profit organizations in Uzbekistan (Ministry of Justice, 2021), many of them have not found their place and role in the public life of Uzbekistan and have shown negligible results from their activities. Meanwhile, citizen participation, citizens' self-governing bodies, non-governmental, non-profit organizations, and the media engaged in the current reforms lagged woefully behind international standards. In particular, most civil society institutions, having legal powers to hold public hearings, to discuss issues related to state bodies and their officials, issues of great social significance, did not pay due attention to this responsibility.

Under the President's initiative, facilities to house NGOs are being installed in all regions of the country, which, one by one, are transferred to the disposal of independent institutions of civil society. Also, they are provided with training on legal issues pertaining to their field to participate and receive national and international grant competitions. Practical assistance

is provided in establishing close cooperation with international organizations. In short, to establish social justice, NGOs are actively supported, which serve to further equality, mutual responsibility, and accountability in the individual, society, and the state (Sattarova, 2021).

Nevertheless, due to concrete support by the Government, activities among institutions engaged in the civil sphere have increased. In particular, one should note that last year, in the context of a pandemic, under the initiative of NGOs, NGOs carried out a tremendous amount of work in the fight against coronavirus. Charity events and all efforts to protect the health of citizens were highly effective (Republican Charitable Foundation “Mahalla”, 2021).

The adoption of the Resolution “On additional measures on the state support of the non-governmental, non-profit organizations, protection of their freedom of activity, the rights and legitimate interests” and the Decree “On the approval of the Concept for developing civil society in 2021-2025” by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, aimed at strengthening the development of civil society represents another step towards the development of civil society in Uzbekistan (Uza.uz, 2021). These two legal documents aim to ensure transparency among NGOs so that stakeholders can be aware of their activities. Ensuring civil society institutions’ transparency has been noted as one of the main directions of the “Concept for developing civil society in 2021–2025.” This decree goes a long way in adding teeth to these efforts in the form of a legal document.

According to the Decree, beginning April 1, 2021, an Index measuring the transparency of non-governmental and non-profit organizations will be introduced. At the end of each year, there will be formulated their rating based on a matrix of non-governmental, non-profit organizations’ activities. Factors contributing to this matrix will be the degree of social partnership, the effectiveness of allocated subsidies, grants, social orders, and other vital indicators.

Also, from now on, information on the activities of non-governmental, non-profit organizations will be posted on their official website (Portal), or on other open-source information portals. Based on the data and assessments made by the public, there will be formulated the index of NGO openness at the end of each year. Simultaneously, the primary indicators are summarized in real-time and will be available for general review. In deciding the Openness Index’s final result, broad participation of governmental and non-governmental organizations, particularly the public, is ensured. Based on the results of the Openness Index, lists (ratings) will be formed for “the top 20 most transparent non-governmental, non-profit organizations” and “the top 20 most active non-governmental, non-profit organizations”. The aim is for the proposed rating system to popularize and further the acceptance by the mainstream society of the positive work conducted by non-governmental and non-profit organizations – thus making them a role model for others. Recommendations (vouchers, certificates) for receiving state grants and social orders within the social partnership framework will be issued. According to newly established procedures, the state will take proper measures to strengthen the material and technical infrastructure (office equipment, computers, other technical means, provision of buildings, etc.) for these nascent organizations. Moreover, through these new measures, we foresee further developing cooperation with government agencies and international organizations.

In conclusion, one should take special note that the President is deeply aware of how important and necessary the third sector’s role is on the path of Uzbekistan’s progressive development. In this regard, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev promotes ideas and initiatives that promise to establish a systemic and effective dialogue between citizens and

civil society institutions under international standards. He seeks a multi-vector approach that combines all levels of society's efforts to develop a State that ensures the adherence to our values as a country and a practical approach to the betterment of the lives of its citizens.

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