

UZBEKISTAN: RAISING THE STATUS OF PUBLIC ASSOCIATIONS IN SOCIETY'S POLITICAL LIFE

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Today, one of the priority areas in enhancing the democratic participation of Uzbekistan's citizens in the country's development is raising the status and influence of public associations in the republic's sociopolitical life. This issue is closely associated with building a democratic state and civil society in our republic, ensuring the growing requirements and interests of different social groups, and raising the efficiency of the activity of the administration institutions. As we know, national (public) control did not suddenly appear out of nothing in Uzbekistan today, it has existed for several centuries, and even though it has not been systematically organized until now, it has nevertheless been a prerequisite of the activity of government bodies.

Society, various social groups, and like-minded people have always made demands on the country's rulers and expressed their attitude toward a particular problem; people would get into an argument, elders and influential figures would put forward their proposals, and then they would urge everyone to come to peace and harmony. There were various ways of putting pressure on the powers that be. The opinions and advice of elders, the works of scientists and writers, and the wishes of aksakals all served as a basis on which the rulers made particular decisions. As a well-known folk saying has it: "Most people have Hizr" (in this sense—wisdom, holiness). But it should be noted that control by society was not always welcomed and valued, during times of dependence, for example, it was a redundant phenomenon.

During the years of independence, opportunities appeared for creating and developing national and public control, measures were carried out for reforming the activity of public associa-

tions and renewing and raising their status and influence on the country's sociopolitical development, and several laws, decrees, and orders directly aimed at changing the activity of their organizations were drawn up and adopted. In particular, Chapter 17 of the Uzbekistan Constitution, Arts 73-75 of the Civil Code (1996), the laws On Nongovernmental Nonprofit Organizations (1999), On Trade Unions, Their Rights and Guarantees of Activity, On Production Manufacturers and Business Chambers (1992), On Religious Organizations and Freedom of Conscience (1998), On Public Funds (2003), and On the Foundations of State Youth Policy in the Republic of Uzbekistan (1991), decrees of the Uzbekistan President, and decisions of the country's Cabinet of Ministers set forth the most important rules and regulations for the reform and development of the activity of public associations.

A new system of public associations has been emerging since the republic acquired its sovereignty: the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Women's Committee, the Kamolot Public Youth Movement, the Association of Organizations of Veterans, the Republican International Cultural Center (RICC), the Public Center of Culture and Enlightenment, the Public Center for the Study of Public Opinion, the Associations of Scientists, Writers, Journalists, and so on. Such organizations as Makhallia, Soglom avlod uchun, Nuroniy, and so on, have also formed in this new system.

It should be noted that along with the transformation of traditional bureaucratic public associations, entirely new public (nongovernmental) bodies have formed during the years of independence that did not exist before in our society's political system. They now include various nongovernmental human rights organizations, the international organization, Ekosan, the Association of Business Women of Uzbekistan, the Uzbekistan Chamber of Industrial Commerce, and so on. A National Association of Nongovernmental Nonprofit Organizations was created, the task of which is to develop nongovernmental nonprofit organizations in the republic.

The number of nongovernmental organizations has been steadily rising. As of today, there are more than 5,000 nongovernmental nonprofit organizations functioning in Uzbekistan with different legal and organizational statuses. Four hundred and eighty-five of them have been registered with the Uzbekistan Ministry of Justice, while the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Karakalpakstan and the departments of justice of Tashkent and regions have registered 4,814 local public associations.¹

During the years of independence, important steps have been taken toward reforming the structure and activity of public associations. This has inevitably yielded positive results. In this way, one of the most important achievements of independence has been the creation of an independent system of public associations.

An analysis of the charters and programs of the country's public associations showed that they were pursuing different interests, relying in so doing on different strata of society and citizen groups. They also encompass all spheres of social life in terms of areas of activity: sociopolitical, human rights, sports, environmental, charitable, cultural-enlightenment, professional, and so on. According to Professor A. Saidov, public associations in Uzbekistan can be divided into the following groups:

- First: national nongovernmental organizations expressing the interests of certain large categories of the population. They include the Makhallia Fund, the Uzbekistan Women's Committee, the Association of Invalids of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Kamolot Youth Fund, the Nuroniy and Veteran funds.

¹ See: A. Saidov, "Legal Guarantee of Nonprofit Organization Activity—Demand of the Times," *Uzbekiston ovozi* (Voice of Uzbekistan), 27 December, 2005 (in Uzbek).

- Second: specialized national and international funds, such as Ekosan, Soglom avlod uchun, the Amir Temur Cultural-Historical Fund, the Democratization of the Press and Journalist Support Fund, the Aral Rescue Fund, the Forum of Cultural and Scientific Figures of the Central Asian States, and so on.
- Third: nongovernmental human rights organizations. For example, the Committee for the Protection of Personal Rights, the Center for the Study of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law.
- Fourth: national and public associations of the creative intelligentsia—writers, actors, artists, composers, architects, cinematographers, as well as judges and lawyers.
- Fifth: national cultural centers (more than 100). They are created for the purpose of preserving the cultural and linguistic traditions of the peoples (national minorities) living in the republic.
- Sixth: national charitable and other funds. These include children's funds, the Fund of Social Protection of Children—children brought up in children's homes, the Fund of Students of the Republic, and so on.
- Seventh: local associations related mainly to socially significant and creative interests—the environment, tourism, amateur art clubs, associations of parents of invalid children, and so on.
- Eighth: public associations—the Izhtimoiy fikr Public Center, the International Center for Training Journalists, and the Sabr Hotline Center, which provides psychological assistance to adolescents and women.²

This is not an exhaustive list. The republic's public associations should be divided in terms of size and type of activity into large and small, traditional and contemporary, in terms of status into rational and irrational, and in terms of formation sources into token and actual. The activity of token public associations is related to the state to a certain extent; they are financed by the government. Actual public associations act independently and finance themselves using their own funds. Token public associations claim to express the interests of specific groups or strata of the population, but in fact are lobbying state interests.

Let us take a more in-depth look at the activity of certain public associations in the republic.

Trade unions have undergone the most intense reform among the republic's public associations during the years of independence. They unite the representatives of different professions, regardless of nationality, gender, or religious belief on a voluntary basis. Their main goals are to improve the working conditions and provide improved cultural and recreational conditions for laborers.

The trade unions of Uzbekistan are considered the largest public associations, uniting more than 7.6 million citizens and approximately 53,000 primary units, which include both branch and territorial trade unions: of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the 12 provinces, and Tashkent.

The organizational structure of trade unions are based on such generally accepted principles of the international trade union movement as federalism, democracy, independence, and voluntarism. All the trade union structures are elected at meetings, conferences, congresses of representatives and report to them.

Trade unions are formed according to production, branch, and territorial principles; branch and territorial trade unions unite as organization members into the Uzbekistan Federation of Trade Unions. Today, 15 branch trade unions and the Kizilkum nodir metallar—oltin union function in the republic.

² See: A. Saidov, "Civil Society and Political Reforms," *Mulokot* (Discussion), No. 5, 2000 (in Uzbek).

The Uzbekistan Federation of Trade Unions is building its activity on the basis of social partnership, in cooperation with state bodies and employers, on democratic standards.

One of the organizations that formed in the republic after it acquired its independence is the Uzbekistan Women's Committee registered with the Uzbekistan Ministry of Justice on 22 December, 1991.

The Uzbekistan Women's Committee is an independent body that unites all the women of Uzbekistan on a voluntary basis, regardless of their nationality, profession, religious convictions, and level of education, and fulfills the following tasks: raising the role of women in society, protecting their interests, satisfying spiritual-enlightenment requirements, rendering psychological, legal, socio-economic assistance, protecting the family, maternity, and childhood, and ensuring the participation of Uzbekistan's women in the movement for peace and democratic development.

The committee is comprised of the republican board, the boards of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, viloiats, and Tashkent, as well as representative offices in the cities and tumans (villages). In addition to them, women's committees function in all the organizations, at enterprises, in work collectives, and in the makhallia (village) committees.

The Uzbekistan Women's Committee is making its contribution to implementing the national Soglom avlod uchun program. It also drew up a joint program with such organizations as Makhallia, Navruz, Ekosan, and others. Along with the Makhallia Foundation and the Kamolot Public Movement, the Women's Committee takes active part in educating the republic's young people.

Numerous associations function under the committee in terms of professions and interests, in particular, the Association of Women Scholars.

The Women's Committee pays special attention to the activity of business women. As of today, there are more than 20,000 women in the country engaged in business, for them favorable conditions are created. Women—economists, lawyers, and creative workers—give consultations on legal and business questions, organize creative evenings and charity concerts, and make efforts to raise the legal culture of women.

During the years of independence, a public youth movement called Kamolot has been formed in the republic, and on 25 April, 2001, it renewed its activity.

Kamolot is a nongovernmental nonprofit organization, the tasks of which are to unite the young people of the republic, help to nurture a healthy lifestyle in them, and ensure comprehensive protection of their interests. It also helps young people to occupy a dignified place in society.

This organization believes an important area in its work to be creating the necessary conditions for young people to fully realize their intellectual potential and capabilities and channel their energy in the right direction, and it also serves as wellspring of support for the younger generation.³ The youth movement's program sets forth the priority goals of the organization's activity in the political-legal, spiritual-enlightenment, social, sports, and international spheres.

As of today, the Kamolot Public Youth Movement is regarded as a large public organization consisting of 14 viloiats, 199 city (regional), and 18,500 primary organizations. Of the 7.2 million young people between the ages of 14 and 28 in the republic, 4.7 million (or 65.3 percent) are its members.

The Central Council governs the youth movement. A monitoring and auditing commission functions in it. The movement's primary organizations have been created in all of the republic's learning institutions.

The Kamolot Public Youth Movement is carrying out various campaigns aimed at preventing negative phenomena among young people and helping them to cultivate communications skills and

³ See: *Programma i Ustav Obshchestvennogo dvizhenia molodezhi Respubliki Uzbekistan "Kamolot,"* Ukituvchi, Tashkent, 2001, pp. 6-7.

ways to freely express their own opinions and ideas. Youth problems are brought up and addressed within the framework of these campaigns.

The Nuroniy Veteran Social Support Foundation is a voluntary self-governed nongovernmental nonprofit charity organization of the republic's veterans. It was created in December 1996 by a Decree of the Uzbekistan President as the legal successor of the Republican Committee of Veterans and the Uzveteran Republican Association of War and Labor Veterans.

This foundation has set itself the following tasks—to promote the efficiency of social reforms conducted in the country and to ensure the social protection of elderly people. It also plays an important role in educating the upcoming generation. The organization actively participates in measures devoted to supporting war and labor veterans and invalids, and renders them medical and material assistance and moral support.

The organization of veterans has branches in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, as well as in all the viloiats and tumans of the country. Public Nuroniy Centers function at large enterprises and in the makhallia.

The Republican International Cultural Center was formed in our country during the years of independence and was created on a decision by the Uzbekistan Cabinet of Ministers of 13 January, 1992.

The RICC is considered an independent organization. It governs the national cultural centers, satisfies the demands of various national groups, and promotes the preservation and development of their native language, culture, and traditions.

The country's international cultural centers express the traditions of the numerically small ethnic groups (diaspora) living in the country. At present, the representatives of more than one hundred nationalities and ethnic groups live alongside the Uzbeks in Uzbekistan and constitute more than 20% of the republic's entire population. Based on this fact, today, there are 122 international cultural centers that occupy a dignified place among Uzbekistan's public associations.

The RICC is planning and carrying out its activity on the basis of recommendations of the Public Council, which is made up of the Center's leaders, the chairmen of the national cultural centers, representatives of organizations, departments, the public, and prominent scientists. The Uzbekistan National Unity movement was created in 1995 on the RICC's initiative, as well as on that of the national cultural centers. The RICC, along with the national cultural centers, the state, and public associations, is helping to execute the article of the Uzbekistan Constitution on the free development of the representatives of every nationality and the development of international relations in the country.⁴

The Izhtimoiy fikr Public Center was set up in 1997 and called upon to help intensify the democratic reforms, ensure human rights, and study the interests of citizens, society, and the state.

The center is a self-governed organization. Its main task is to monitor public opinion on questions regarding the government bodies' interaction with society, human rights, urgent socioeconomic problems, spiritual-enlightenment, and political-legal changes, and other important issues of social relations. It also aims to define people's world outlook, the main principles and processes forming their political, legal, economic, and moral consciousness, study the degree of political-legal culture of the population, and define the main trends in its development.

The Center's significance lies in the fact that it makes it possible to reveal all the diversity and complexity of the sociopolitical processes. It is also helping the ruling bodies to obtain reliable infor-

⁴ See: *Republic of Uzbekistan. Encyclopedic Reference*, the team of author: N. Tukhliev and A. Kremontsov, National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan Publishers, Tashkent, 2002, pp. 229-241 (in Uzbek).

mation, assess the efficiency of governance, summarize the changes going on in society, and obtain the information necessary for studying the new trends.

The Ma'naviat va ma'rifat Republican Center was formed on 23 April, 1994 on a decree by the Uzbekistan President in order to raise the spirituality of the people, as well as form business skills among citizens. Public associations occupy a special place in ensuring employment of the population. They include the Association of Business Women of Uzbekistan, the Kamolot Youth Movement, and the Chamber of Manufacturers and Entrepreneurs. In 2000 alone, the Association of Business Women of Uzbekistan created conditions for 250 women to engage in business and professional activity by attracting grants and foreign investments into the country. The Kamolot Movement was able to provide 6,000 young people with jobs by holding special fairs, and another 2,000 were sent to advanced training courses. On the whole, in six years, the Kamolot Youth Movement resolved or found ways to resolve specific problems in 150,000 cases.⁵

At the same time, it cannot be said that the activity of public associations entirely meets all the demands today, and in this respect we very much lag behind the developed countries. Today, there are 17 nongovernmental organizations and public movements in Uzbekistan per 1 million residents, whereas in Sweden this index is 20 per 1 million members of the population. In this sense, we cannot agree with G. Khidoiatova, head of the NGO Law Training Center and OSCE international expert on human rights, that a civil society is not measured by the number of NGOs.⁶ The building of a democratic and civil society is determined not by the quantity, but by the quality of the activity of public associations, although the quantitative index is still important. The number of public associations should be proportional to civil society.

The public associations are finding it difficult to assimilate contemporary working methods under the new conditions. They do not have enough initiative, efficiency, or innovativeness in protecting public interests. This is particularly noticeable in traditional organizations, whose leaders prefer to group around the government structures. Some public associations believe they should blindly carry out the orders of the executive bodies. As a result, the rating of such associations among the population is going down, since people are losing their trust in them.

What is the reason for this dysfunction? In our opinion, it lies in the insufficient development of the legal base of the activity of public associations. In particular, this can be seen in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, where the tasks and place of state government institutions in the life of society are quite extensively highlighted, but nothing is said about the independence and tasks of public associations. This approach can be called unilateral.

In recent years, much has been said about the need to develop a civil society and public associations in Uzbekistan. This should be evaluated as a positive trend, but very few serious practical steps have been made in this direction. In particular, the proposals put forward by Islam Karimov⁷ on making amendments to the Law on Public Associations and on the necessity for adopting laws On Social Foundations, and On Charitable Activity have still not been implemented. The Law on the Foundations of State Youth Policy in the Republic of Uzbekistan was adopted in 1991 and does not meet today's social needs.

The existing laws do not set forth mechanisms, means, forms, tools, and methods for public associations to have an impact on the government bodies, so it is more convenient for them to go along with the state executive bodies and not try to influence them.

⁵ See: *Uzbekistan k grazhdanskomu obshchestvu*, ed. by R. Alimov, Shark, Tashkent, 2003, 73 pp.

⁶ See: G. Khidoiatova, "Nastoiashchee grazhdanskoe obshchestvo ne izmeriaetsia kolichestvom NNO," *Turkiston*, 4 January, 2006.

⁷ See: I.A. Karimov, *Osnovnye napravlenia uglublenia demokraticeskikh preobrazovani i formirovania osnov grazhdanskogo obshchestva*, Uzbekiston, Tashkent, 2002, 25 pp.

Another obstacle on the path to the development of public associations is the fact they have no right to legislate,⁸ which makes them a target of the political system and prevents them from actively participating in the drawing up of drafts, laws, programs, and decisions. This is also having an impact on the effectiveness of the decisions made.

And finally, there is another serious obstacle in the development of public associations —the weakness and passivity of the general and special political education system.

Today not one of the republic's higher education institutions is offering training courses for people who want to work in civil society institutions and public associations. As a result, there is a low level of political knowledge among the members of these organizations, and throughout society as a whole. The results of research studies showed that every sixth businessman has no idea not only about the political system as a whole, but also about the existence of professional associations of businessmen in particular.⁹

The problems listed above are doubtlessly having a certain effect on the renewal and development of public associations in Uzbekistan.

How can the status and role of public associations be raised in public life?

In our opinion, this sphere requires just as much attention as state administration. The legal foundation for the activity of public associations should be seriously reviewed and improved from the viewpoint of clarifying their independent role and place in the political system and main tasks as an expression of the interests of social groups and strata of society. As Islam Karimov noted: "The more we intensify the state's control functions, the larger the number of controlling state bodies and structures, and the more the tyranny of officials and corruption will grow. So we are paying particular attention to increasing public control over the activity of the state, including over its power-related structures. There can be no other alternative in this question."¹⁰ This is precisely why the laws on public associations should set forth the mechanisms, means, and tools of this control and designate that the main tasks of public associations are to articulate and form aggregates of the interests of different strata of the population, study and assess their problems, and submit the latter in the form of demands, petitions, and programs for government bodies to review. The main task is to raise the political education and awareness of the population. Further, attention should be focused on raising the responsibility of public associations and obliging executive and legislative bodies of different levels not to make decisions without discussing the issue in advance with the public structures concerned.

Raising the status and influence of public associations is a high-priority task in intensifying civil control over government organizations. Public control is playing an important stabilizing role in the relations between citizens and the state, ensures their equilibrium, and prevents the state from applying too much pressure. This is the only way to ensure law and justice in practice.

⁸ See: *Delovaia sreda v Uzbekistane glazami predprinimatelei malogo i srednego biznesa. Po itogam 2003 g.*, Tashkent, 2004, p. 35.

⁹ See: *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ See: I.A. Karimov, *Uzbekistan—k velikomu budushchemu*, Uzbekiston, Tashkent, 1998, 555 pp.