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The Role and Features of Uzbek Local Authorities within a System of Strong Central Government

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ABSTRACT

The Councils of People's Deputies (*Xalq deputatlari Kengashlari*) are the representatives of Uzbek state authorities in regions, districts and towns. The *hokims* (governors) of regions, districts and towns are the highest officials of the state's local authorities. They simultaneously serve as heads of representatives and executive authorities in their respective territories. In the small settlements, *kishlaks* and *auls* (villages) and in the residential neighbourhoods (*mahallas*) of cities and towns, the residents of the particular *mahallas* decide all local matters at general meetings. These local self-governing bodies elect their Chairmen (*aksakal*) and the members of his chamber for a term of two-and-a-half years.

In Uzbekistan's system of strong central government, local government has little independence. The chief executive of each province and of Tashkent is the *hakim*, who is appointed by the president. Although these appointments must be confirmed by local legislative bodies that are elected by popular vote, the power of the president is dominant. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has introduced wide-ranging economic, judicial, and social reforms to increase local officials' accountability. This paper thus provides an account of the Uzbek local authorities' roles, functions and the reform processes the government has introduced to better organize the state authority bodies at the *regional, districts* and *mahalla* levels.

Keywords: Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan, Politics, Reforms, Central Government, Local Authorities, Mahalla, Aksakal.

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Güçlü bir Merkezi Yönetim Sistemi içinde Özbekistan Yerel Yönetimlerinin Rol ve Özellikleri

ÖZ

Özbekistan'da vilayet, şehir, ilçe ve kasaba düzeyindeki yerel temsilci yetkilileri Halk Meclisleri Konseyleri, (*Xalq deputatlari Kengashlari*)' dir. Vilayetlerin, ilçelerin ve kasabaların devlet otoritesinin temsilcileri olan Halk Temsilcileri; vilayetlerin, ilçelerin ve kasabaların **valileri**, eyaletin yerel otoritelerinin en üst düzey yetkilileridir ve aynı zamanda kendi bölgelerinde temsilciler meclisinin ve yürütme organlarının başları olarak görev yaparlar. Küçük yerleşim yerlerinde, *kishlaklar* ve *aullar* (köyler) ile şehir ve kasabaların meskun yerleşim yerlerinde *mahalleler*, belirli mahallelerin sakinleri, genel toplantılarda tüm yerel meselelerin kararvericileridir. Bu yerel "özerk yönetim" organları, *aksakal* ve başkanlık meclisi azalarını (üyelerini) iki buçuk yıllık bir süre için seçerler.

Özbekistan'ın güçlü merkezi yönetim sisteminde, yerel yönetimlerin bağımsızlığı söz konusu değil. Her bölgenin (vilayetinin) ve Taşkent'in yetkili amiri, devlet başkanı tarafından atanan bir hakim (bölge valisi)' dir. Bu atamaların halk oyu ile seçilen yerel yasama organları tarafından onaylanması gerekmesine rağmen, devlet başkanının gücü baskındır ve atadığı kişi yerel meclis tarafından reddedilemez. Shavkat Mirziyayev, göreve gelir gelmez farklı alanları hedefliyerek kapsamlı ekonomik, adli ve sosyal reformları başlattı. Yerel yetkililerin teşvik edici stratejisinin bir parçası olarak hesap verilebilirliğini artırmak için bir "Gelişmiş Kamu Hizmeti Kurumları" sistemini başlattı. Bu makale, Özbek yerel yönetim organlarının rollerini ve işlevlerini belirterek, merkezi hükümetin vilayetler, iller, ilçeler ve mahalle bazında bu kurumları daha verimli hale getirmek için başlattığı reform süreçlerini ve bu süreçlerin ne derece başarılı olduklarını göstermeye çalışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mirziyayev, Özbekistan, Politika, Reformlar, Merkezi Hükümet, Yerel Yönetimler, Vilayet, Mahalle, Aksakal

Giriş

Uzbekistan is located in the heart of Central Asia, and lies between two “sister rivers”, the Amu Darya (Oxus) and the Syr Darya (Jaxartes), the largest and deepest rivers in Central Asia. The republic lies along a north-west to south-east axis and its eastern extremity, the Fergana Valley region, borders Kyrgyzstan to the east, Tajikistan to the southeast, Afghanistan to the south, and Turkmenistan to the southwest and the west. The northwest of the country consists of the Aral Sea, and beyond that lies Kazakhstan, which forms the entire northern border.

Uzbekistan covers an area of 447.4 square kilometres (172.740 sq. miles), of which the Karakalpak Autonomous Republic covering 165.6 sq. kilometres. The country is divided into 12 provinces or regions (*Viloyatlar*, singular - *Viloyat*), one autonomous republic (the Karakalpakstan Republic), one city- the city of Tashkent and subdivided into 162 districts, in which there are 118 cities, 116 towns and 1332 villages. The entire territory spans 930 km from north to south and 1425 km from east to west. The country is about the size of Sweden, or slightly larger than the U.S. state of California.² According to a recent report by the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan the country has a population of about 33 million.³ Spoken languages are Uzbek and Russian. The Republic of Uzbekistan became an independent state in September 1991 following the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

After independence in 1991, Uzbekistan had to face the problem of establishing a new system of state authority bodies and a way for them to participate and function within the new political environment. Two goals had to be achieved. Firstly, in place of the old Soviet totalitarian state machinery, there had to be a new system of state authority which would be legitimate, democratic and favour the market economy. Secondly, during the transition period it demanded increasingly the power of the executive-managing authority, and concentrating basic powers in executive bodies, both at the centre and at regional local levels.

According to the law on the “State Authority Bodies” adopted on 2nd of September 1993, the local representative authorities at the regional, district and city levels are the local councils, the full name in Uzbek is “*Xalq deputatlari Kengashlari*” (the Councils of People’s Deputies) that are the representatives of state authority in regions, districts and towns. The *hokim* of regions, districts and towns are the highest officials of the state’s local authorities and they simultaneously serve as heads of representatives and executive authorities in their respective territories. The *hokim* of the regions and the city of Tashkent are accountable to the President of the republic of Uzbekistan and to the appropriate Councils of People’s Deputies. The *hokim* of districts and towns are accountable to regional *hokims* and to the appropriate Councils of People’s Deputies. The *hokims* of regions and the city of Tashkent are appointed by the President of the republic while the *hokims* of districts are appointed by the *hokims* of the regions.

The term of office of the Local Councils and their leaders (*hokims*) is for five years. Hokims have historically been appointed by the president to serve for five years. Sitting atop the regional power structure, they constitute the highest authority in their regions. There are 12 regions in Uzbekistan, plus Tashkent city and the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. The 12 regions and Tashkent city are governed by hokims (*viloyat hokimi* and *Toshkent shahar hokimi*). Each region and the

2 Resul Yalcin, *The Rebirth of Uzbekistan; politics, economy and society in the post-Soviet era*, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2002, p.46.

3 “Uzbekistan's population exceeds 33 million” *Asia & Pacific*, 15.10.2018 (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/15/c_137533698.htm) Access: 18.06.2019

Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan is divided into districts and cities that are governed by district and city hokims (*tuman* and *shahar hokimi*). The Constitution of Uzbekistan donates a wide range of responsibilities on hokims, ranging from safety and security of the population to oversight of economic, social, cultural, fiscal, utility, and environmental matters.⁴

The centre of the strong executive authority in the regions is a combination of functions of the representative and executive-managing authorities; its head is a *hokim*. The *hokims* of the regions and the city of Tashkent are appointed and dismissed by the President. The *hokims* of districts, cities and towns are appointed and dismissed by the *hokim* of the relevant region, while the *hokims* of city districts are appointed and dismissed by the *hokim* of the relevant city.⁵ The *hokims* of towns subordinate to district centres are appointed and dismissed by the *hokim* of the district. The *hokims* of regions, districts, cities and towns exercise their powers in accordance with the principle of one-man management and bear personal responsibility for the decisions and the work of the bodies they lead. The *hokim* makes decisions within his/her vested powers and they are binding on all enterprises, institutions, organizations, associations, officials, and citizens in the relevant territory. In the small settlements, *kishlaks* and *auls* (villages) and in residential neighbourhoods (*mahallas*) of cities and towns, the residents of particular *mahallas* decide all local matters at general meetings. These local self-governing bodies elect their Chairmen (*aksakal*) and the members of his chamber for a term of two-and-a-half years. The *aksakals* are usually responsible to city districts' *hokims* or *hokims* of towns. The *aksakal's* role as headman in the *mahalla* is important though he becomes a government employee.⁶

The sudden collapse of the USSR in 1990 and the formation of a new sovereign state triggered a reduction in the number of executive disciplines at all levels of the government, and increased in lawlessness in the whole society and in the state authority bodies in particular. Therefore, there was a need to establish an institution of *hokims* not elected, but appointed by higher bodies to which lower bodies were to be subordinate.⁷ It offered a chance to concentrate the efforts of different bodies in one

4. Yalcin, *The Rebirth of Uzbekistan; politics, economy and society in the post-Soviet era*, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2002, pp.191-93., Toshkent oqshomi gazetasi, 18 iyun 2001. X.H. Бабабеков, *Англо-русское соперничество в Средней Азии, XIX век*, Tashkent, 2006, p.41. N. P. Azizov, I. Saidaxmedov, *Davlat va huquq tarixini o'rganish yuzasidan metodik materiallar*, Tashkent, O'zbekiston Respublikasi IIV Akademiyasi, 2003, p.58. Ma'sul muharrirlar D. Alimova, E. V. Rtveldadze, *O'zbekiston davlatchiligi tarixi ocherklari*, Tashkent, O'zR FA tarix instituti, 2001, p.200. Umida Hashimova, "Hokim Hubbub: Making Sense of Local Government Shuffles in Uzbekistan", *The Diplomat*, 6 August 2018. (<https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/hokim-hubbub-making-sense-of-local-government-shuffles-in-uzbekistan/>) Accessed: 28.06.2019

5. N. Jo'rayev, T. Fayzullayev, *Mustaqil Ozbekiston tarixi*, Tashkent. 2000. Y. Gulomov, R. Nabiyeu, *O'zbekiston SSR tarixi*, Tashkent, 1958, p.313. H. Sodiqov, R. Shamsuddinov, P. Ravshanov, Q. Usmonov, *Turkiston chor Rossiyasi mustamlakachiligi davrida*, Tashkent. 2000, p.203. Sh. Jalilov, *Davlat hokimiyati mahalliy organlari islohoti*, Tashkent, 1994, p.25. Y. Ollamov, I. Bekov, *O'zbekiston Respublikasining Konstitutsiyasi va mahalliy davlat hokimiyati*, Tashkent, 2005. p.26. Ma'sul muharrirlar D. Alimova, E.V. Rtveldadze, *O'zbekiston davlatchiligi tarixi ocherklari*, Tashkent, O'zR FA tarix instituti, 2001. p.200.

6. See also Shuhrat Jalilov, *Davlat Hokimiyoti Mahalliy Organlari Islohoti: Tajriba va Muammalar*, Tashkent, Uzbekiston, 1994. Mahalla yangilanish Davrida, (*Mahalla in the Revival period*) Tashkent, Mehnat, 1995, and Savkat Mirolimov, *Mahalla Mahri, (The Affection of Mahalla)* Tashkent, Navruz, 1994. Islom Karimov, *Buyuk Maksad Yolidan Ogishmailik, (On the Way to the Great Goal)* Tashkent, Uzbekiston, 1993, and Karimov, *Uzbekistoning Siyasi-Ictimayi va Iktisodiy Istikbolining Asosiy Tamoyillari, (The Main Principles of Political-Social and Economic Revival of Uzbekistan)* Tashkent, Uzbekiston, 1995.

7. O. Karimova, *Huquqshunoslik*. Tashkent, 2002, p.34. N. Jo'rayev, T. Fayzullayev, *Mustaqil O'zbekiston tarixi*, Tashkent, 2000, p.107, H. Boboyev, A. X. Saidov, *O'zbekiston Respublikasi Konstitutsiyasini o'rganish*.

direction, and to discourage rivalry between the different branches of authority bodies. It gave the chance to implement reforms more decisively at the local level, to carry out structural reconstructions, and to provide social guarantees to the most vulnerable members of the communities.

The powers of the Councils of People's Deputies and *hokims* are distinguished by the constitution and by particular laws. The Councils of People's Deputies' main duties in the regions, districts and towns are to ensure the observance of laws, maintain law and order, and ensure the security of citizens. These include: directing economic, social and cultural developments within their territories; proposing and implementing the local budget; determining local taxes and proposing non-budget funds. They also direct the municipal economy; protect the environment; ensure the registration of civil status acts and pass normative acts; ratify the local budget presented by the *hokims* and report on its implementation; and ratify the development programmes of territories.⁸ They also approve the *hokims* and deputy *hokims*, and can remove them, as well as hear their activity reports. Finally, they can cancel laws if the latter violate the legislation of the republic of Uzbekistan and the decisions of *hokims*.

The *hokims* organise the enforcement of laws and acts of the *Oliy Majlis*, the decrees of the President and decisions of higher bodies of the state authority and the relevant Councils of People's Deputies. They also take measures regarding the observance of social order and the fight against crime; provide the safety of citizens; protect the rights and health of the people in the region; ensures the provision of infrastructural and training requirements of economic and social development in districts, regions and towns; they prepare the regional, district and town's budgets for approval by the Councils of People's Deputies and report on its implementation. The *hokims* present decisions on the appointment and removal of deputy *hokims* and heads of structural subdivisions of the executive authority for ratification by the Councils of People's Deputies. They also appoint and remove heads of subdivisions of the *hokimiyat's* machinery. They are the representatives of the regions, districts and towns in the country.

In theory, power is divided between the regional assemblies and the regional governors (*hokims*) enhancing the prospects for democratic reforms in different parts of the country. In practice however, things are rather different. In the local assemblies power usually rests in local governors' hands, and this is usually a *hokim* who is not elected by the people but appointed by the President of the country. The establishment of this kind of system of state authority at the regional level with the concentration of representative and executive authority with *hokims* may have been acceptable during the first stage of reforms when the retention of independence, implementation of economic reforms and maintenance of stability in society were the main priorities for the regime.

This of course does not mean that the first stage of the reforms was a total success. There have certainly been wrongdoings and the misuse of the power all over

Tashkent, 2001, p.380.

8. Ma'sul muharrir Z. X. Orifxonova. *Toshkent mahallalari: an'analar va zamonaviylik*. Tashkent, 2002, p.40. Mustaqillik, *Izohli ilmiy-ommabop lug'at*. Tashkent, 1998. p.113. *O'zbekiston Oqsoqollar Kengashining Nizomi*, 412-son bilan Adliya vazirligi tomonidan ro'yxatga olingan, 15 May 2000. *O'zbekiston Oqsoqollar Kengashi 1-ta'sis Qurultoyida (Majlis) tasdiqlangan*. 6 noyabr, 1999. *O'zbekiston Respublikasining Konstitutsiyasi va mahalliy davlat hokimiyati*, Tashkent, 2005, p.62.

the country, but nonetheless, the political elite did manage to hold Uzbekistan together during the difficult period of transition to a market economy and a democratic civil society.

The reason why Karimov initially wanted to appoint the regional governors, rather than allowing for their election by the people of the regions concerned, was probably guided by the fear that during the implementation of the progressive economic reforms, there would be pressure for economic independence in different regions and the decision makers would concentrate on their own regions, but ignore the wider picture of the country. The government considered this a dangerous move which might have led to the rise of separatist or segregationist tendencies in particular regions.

However, at a later stage where the government was trying to implement the second and third stages of the reforms from 1996 up until 2002, serious alterations to the system of regional assemblies became necessary. As instruments for the realization of the reforms they may be effective during one stage but ineffective and even harmful under other conditions if one does not take measures to improve the structure and mechanisms of state authority.

Thus, the analysis of the local authorities has shown that the problem of a weak legislative authority in Uzbekistan exists not only at the level of local representative state authority bodies, but also at the highest legislative level, the Parliament of the republic. The Parliament is as weak before the President as the local assemblies are before the *hokims*. All these signs of obvious weaknesses of the legislative authority and the underdeveloped mechanisms of interaction between the executive and legislative bodies may well be a result of the absence of reliable and effective mechanisms and the absence of any control on the activity of executive authorities by the legislature or a representative authority.

In Uzbekistan's system of strong central government, local government has little independence. The chief executive of each province and of Tashkent is the *hakim*, who is appointed by the president. Although these appointments must be confirmed by local legislative bodies that are elected by popular vote, the power of the president is dominant. The Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan also officially elects its own legislature; the chairman of the legislature serves as the republic's head of state and as a deputy chairman of the national parliament. But in the autonomous republic, too, government officials are generally powerless against Tashkent.⁹

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.¹⁰ Local councils, despite having official status as local legislative bodies, are in practice subordinated to the local state administrations.

Accordingly, Uzbekistan's public administration system can hardly be regarded

9 Yalcin, *The Rebirth of Uzbekistan; politics, economy and society in the post-Soviet era*, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2002, p.193-94

10 Rustam Urinboyev, "Local Government in Uzbekistan." In A. Farazmand (Ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance* Springer, 2018, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_3665-1.

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 failing local governments are mainly the outcome of a centralized government that does not delegate any real autonomy to local administrations. Public participation in local politics is almost non-existent, and local elections are merely used to assert and legitimize the central government’s influence in the periphery. 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.

Uzbekistan’s first president, Islam Karimov, led Uzbekistan for 25 years until his death on 2nd September 2016. Karimov’s successor, former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, as soon as resumed power has improved relations with Uzbekistan’s neighbours and introduced wide-ranging economic, judicial, and social reforms. He has meaningfully improved worsening relations with Uzbekistan’s concerned neighbours and inevitably introduced wide-ranging economic, judicial, and social reforms to radically improve the worsening situation in his country.

Mirziyoyev in late 2016, initiated a new anticorruption law which was entered into force in early January 2017, followed by a state anticorruption program and a system of “advanced public service agencies” to increase local officials’ accountability as part of a strategy for stimulating public engagement through media and the internet. The system produced some progress, but many issues remained unaddressed.

Mirziyoyev has, since 2017, changed and reappointed many regional and district *hokims* as well as the heads of prosecutors’ offices, police, and other agencies. The reasons for dismissal are usually ambiguous and generalized as lack of accountability to the population they serve. The real reasons could be the new leadership’s contempt for the “old way” of working, but dismissed officials were frequently reappointed in other offices. At the same time, the frequent and constant changing of officials was seen as a sign that Mirziyoyev government lacked consistent criteria and policies regarding civil servants. It thus, seems that the outright dismissal of regional *hokims* has tended to happen with more caution, perhaps to avoid agitating a disgraced official and disturbing loyalties and kinship ties which *hokims* built during their administration terms.¹¹

Mirziyoyev’s leadership is not an all-out offensive against local governments. He has clearly offered his backing to *hokims* and is attempting to raise their status. In his famous four-hour address to the *Oliy Majlis* (parliament) on 22 December 2017,

11 Anthony Clive Bowyer, “Political Reform in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan: Elections, Political Parties and Civil Society”, *Institute for Security & Development Policy*, March 2018. <http://isd.eu/publication/political-reform-mirziyoyevs-uzbekistan/> Access: 28.06.2019. Hashimova, U. “Hokim Hubbub: Making Sense of Local Government Shuffles in Uzbekistan”, *The Diplomat*, 6 August 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/hokim-hubbub-making-sense-of-local-government-shuffles-in-uzbekistan/> Accessed: 28.06.2019.

See also Urinboyev, R. *Local Government in Uzbekistan*. In A. Farazmand (Ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance* Springer, 2018, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_3665-1. Mjuša Sever, “Judicial and Governance Reform in Uzbekistan”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program*, Lithuania, 2018. www.silkroadstudies.org/ Access: 26.06.2019. “Özbekistan’daki köklü değişimler neyi ifade ediyor?” <http://www.kazakistan.kz/ozbekistandaki-koklu-degisimler-neyi-ifade-ediyor/> Access: 18.06.2019. “2017: Özbekistan’da reform yılı” <http://qha.com.ua/tr/analiz-haber/quot-2017-ozbekistanda-reform-yili-quot/163764/> Access: 18.06.2019

he clearly stated that “a *hokims* is the representative of a president” and that “any actions against *hokims* without a due process, including their imprisonment, will trigger equal punishment.” Mirziyoyev later made it clear of what he had referred to in his address when he described the anarchy in local governments created by the National Security Service (the SNB- the successor of the Soviet-era KGB).

Since 1991, as the political system evolved in Uzbekistan, the National Security Service (SNB) became the most important state institution created to ensure security, survival and internal stability. It was the backbone of the entire state structure, but it began controlling all aspects of political, social, and economic life in the country, and through this it also gained revenue.

The main, unofficial source of financing for the SNB was exploitation of various social groups in connection with inspections and repression, namely in the economic and also political and religious spheres. This entailed breaching democratic freedoms, human rights, and even Uzbekistan’s law and Constitution. The actions of the SNB blocked the development of independent political, social and religious life of any kind in Uzbekistan.

Gen. Rustam Inoyatov, head of the SNB, since 1995 was the most powerful, long-serving and much-feared Karimov-era security chief. An element that blocked Uzbekistan’s economic development has been the SNB’s multi-dimensional control over financial flow and the private sector, and the inefficiency of the public sector. Business activity was only possible if protection money was also paid to “custodians” in the special forces of the SNB.

Control over financial flow caused a black market to emerge for currency, from which the SNB profited. This was one of the major obstacles on the road to Uzbekistan’s economic development. Even at the beginning of Karimov’s rule the secular and religious opposition was liquidated. At the same time, repression became more extreme as it was used to tighten the authorities’ control over society.

Shortly, following his speech to parliament, on 31 January 2018, Mirziyoyev dismissed the Chief of SNB General Rustam Inoyatov and replaced him with Ikhtiyor Abdullayev¹², who served as the Prosecutor General of Uzbekistan since 2015, and earlier - since 2009 - as the state adviser to the President. Mirziyoyev said Uzbekistan didn't need a security agency that "spies on governors and other government officials" and ordered the SNB to remove its' agents from the country's diplomatic missions abroad and banned law enforcement agencies from conducting searches and wiretaps without court orders.

He also ordered the removal of 18,000 names from the SNB’s extremist blacklists, who were judged disloyal by the SNB under Karimov and reorganised the SNB into State Security Service (*Davlat Xavfsizlik Xizmati*). He ordered it to focus on protecting the state rather than watching and harassing citizens.

However, the extent of Mirziyoev's planned reforms of the SNB remains unclear. The dismissed SNB officers have been employed, following checks, in the militia and army, probably to prevent them from becoming a destructive force.

Gen. Rustam Inoyatov was appointed as state advisor to the President of Uzbekistan on political and legal issues. At the local level Mirziyoyev’s government

12 Hashimova, R. “Reforms Reach Uzbekistan’s Most Formidable Bastion of Power”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 15 Issue: 20, 8 February 2018. <https://jamestown.org/program/reforms-reach-uzbekistans-formidable-bastion-power/> Accessed: 30.06.2019. “Uzbekistan reforms: President Mirziyoyev sacks security chief” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42887336/> Accessed: 18.06.20189

however, is fighting battles on two fronts. On one hand, Mirziyoyev is the defender of *hokims*, elevating their roles and guaranteeing immunity in exchange for his reform program and moving their economies toward sustainability. On the other hand, he is the opponent of *hokims*, battling them, tossing and planting them back into the system where he desires and demanding that they live up to his expectations.¹³

In 2018, Uzbek government continued with its' comprehensive action plan for administrative reform that aims to result in an effective and transparent system of public administration, capable of protecting the rights of citizens and bolstering Uzbekistan's economic competitiveness- globally, improving institutional, organizational, and legal framework of the executive authorities' activities and the formation of an effective system of professional civil service, as well as the introduction of effective mechanisms to combating corruption in the system of executive authorities. Once closed and authoritarian, Uzbekistan seems to be opening up.

However, the question is, how structural and sustained will this become? We don't know exactly the extent the current leadership wants to reform and how far they will go. Is this a two steps forward, one step back process? It is not clear yet. One of the characteristics of Uzbek politics is that it is extremely opaque.

It is possible that economic concerns drove the president to decide that they had to skilfully dismantle Karimov's system and initiate enough reforms to open their economy for foreign investment, without opening the political sphere. It is also quite possible that the president is acting in order to consolidate his authority or inspire popular support in the country.

In one hand we can say that, Mirziyoyev is serious about his political and economic programmes of opening up to the world as he has introduced a comprehensive reform process, but in the other hand, a heavy-handed police force and unreformed security apparatus surveillance system over the public is still intact.

There are still no independent nongovernmental organizations or political parties. The national and local media are completely under control of the government. The security services' powers remain deep and vast, free elections and political pluralism are distant dreams, and there are still thousands of people in prison on politically motivated charges. Freedom of speech and of the press have undeniably improved under Mirziyoyev, but remains restricted.¹⁴

The president has urged the media not to hold back in addressing urgent social issues. Some journalists are now covering sensitive issues such as, forced labour and corruption that were previously taboo, helping to bring the cases of injustice or wrongdoing by officials forward. Yet much of the media remains under state control, and censorship is the norm. Journalists self-censor, unclear where the "red lines" are.

Meanwhile, the most important process under way in Uzbekistan is that of consolidation of power by the new president, and a key element of this is dismantling the power enjoyed to date by the National Security Service. The curbing of the position of the National Security Service, which has been successful so far, entails internal restructuring of the state apparatus. The Uzbek regional authorities are being reformed but the power of a strong central government is being reshaped and maintained over the regional administrations.

13 . Hashimova, U. "Hokim Hubbub: Making Sense of Local Government Shuffles in Uzbekistan", *The Diplomat*, 6 August 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/hokim-hubbub-making-sense-of-local-government-shuffles-in-uzbekistan/> Accessed: 28.06.2019.

14 "Uzbekistan Events 2018", *Human Rights Watch Report 2019*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/uzbekistan/> Accessed: 29.06.2019

The relationship between the local state administrations and the central government in Uzbekistan is often based on subordinate relations rather than on mutual cooperation. The local governments continue to be subordinated to central government in all public policy issues, be it education, taxation, healthcare, welfare, or agriculture. Important public policy decisions are made at the central governmental level. As a result local governments are merely concerned with implementing centrally designed policies.

Mirziyoyev's reforms do not aim to decentralise the existing local authority system, but aims to make local authorities better organised at the *regional, districts* and *mahalla* levels, become more efficient, less corrupt, get the public involved with local issues and achieve sustainable regional economies. One of the most urgent priorities of the reform processes the government has introduced is to get regional officials to act in accordance with newly reformed laws. For that reason, Mirziyoyev is elevating roles of *hokims* and guaranteeing them immunity in exchange for his reform programme, getting the public involved with the local issues and moving their economy toward sustainability. To accomplish these swiftly, Mirziyoyev is also battling the local officials, especially the *hokims*, plucking, tossing and planting them back into the system where he desires and demanding that they live up to his expectations. But for these reforms to truly take root, it is also important to provide political openings for civil society and the media to engage directly with the process of governing. As a result, it is worth following these challenges closely as the outcomes will foreshadow the future of the local government system in Uzbekistan.



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