



THE EVOLUTION OF THE THIRD SECTOR IN UZBEKISTAN: LAW, POLICY, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Kabilova Gulnora Radjabovna

Academic Lyceum of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of
Samarkand
Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

Abstract. *This article examines the role of the third sector in the formation and development of civil society in Uzbekistan from a legal and institutional perspective. The study is grounded in the concept of civil society as a fundamental element of a democratic state and focuses on the functions and capacities of non-governmental and non-profit organizations within the national legal framework. Particular attention is given to the evolution of the third sector in the context of reforms initiated under Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which have aimed to expand civic participation, strengthen public oversight, and modernize governance. The research employs normative legal analysis, comparative methods, and institutional assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of existing mechanisms regulating the interaction between the state and civil society institutions. The findings demonstrate that while Uzbekistan has established a formal legal basis supporting the activities of NGOs and other third sector entities, significant challenges remain in terms of administrative barriers, financial sustainability, and the degree of institutional independence. A distinctive feature of the Uzbek model is the integration of traditional community-based structures, particularly the Mahalla system, into the broader framework of civil society, creating a hybrid system of civic engagement. The article concludes that despite notable progress, further legal and institutional reforms are necessary to enhance the autonomy, effectiveness, and participatory potential of the third sector in Uzbekistan, ensuring its alignment with international democratic standards.*

Keywords: *third sector, civil society, non-governmental organizations, Uzbekistan, legal regulation, public participation, mahalla, democratic governance.*

Introduction. The development of civil society is widely recognized as a key indicator of democratic transformation and the consolidation of the rule of law. In contemporary legal discourse, the third sector—comprising non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit institutions, and community-based associations—plays a central role in mediating relations between the state and citizens, ensuring public participation, and promoting accountability. In transitional legal systems, particularly in post-Soviet states, the evolution of the third sector reflects broader processes of institutional reform, political liberalization, and socio-economic modernization. In recent years, Uzbekistan has undergone significant legal and institutional changes aimed at strengthening democratic governance and enhancing civic engagement. These reforms, associated with the policy agenda of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, have emphasized the importance of openness, transparency, and dialogue between the state and society. As a result, the legal framework regulating the activities of NGOs and other civil society institutions has been gradually expanded, and new mechanisms of public participation and oversight have been introduced.

At the same time, the development of civil society in Uzbekistan demonstrates specific national characteristics. Unlike classical Western models, where civil society is largely independent from state structures, the Uzbek system incorporates elements of traditional self-governance, most notably the Mahalla system. This institution performs not only social and administrative functions but also acts as an intermediary between citizens and public authorities, thereby shaping a hybrid model of civil society that combines formal legal institutions with historically rooted community practices. Despite the ongoing reforms and the expansion of the legal basis for third sector activities, a number of challenges persist. These include administrative and procedural barriers to NGO registration and operation, limited access to sustainable funding sources, and questions regarding the degree of institutional independence and effectiveness of civil society organizations.

Moreover, there remains a noticeable gap between formally established legal guarantees and their practical implementation.

Against this background, the present study aims to analyze the role of the third sector in the formation and development of civil society in Uzbekistan, focusing on legal regulation, institutional structures, and practical functioning. The research seeks to identify key trends, assess existing limitations, and propose directions for further improvement in line with international democratic standards.

Materials and Methods. The study is based on a qualitative approach combining normative legal analysis, comparative legal method, and institutional assessment. The research materials include national legislation governing non-governmental and non-profit organizations, as well as policy documents adopted within the framework of reforms associated with Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Normative analysis was applied to evaluate the legal framework regulating the third sector, including procedures for registration, operation, and interaction with public authorities. The comparative method was used to identify similarities and differences between Uzbekistan and selected foreign jurisdictions. Institutional analysis focused on the roles and functions of key actors, including NGOs and the Mahalla system. The study also incorporates a functional approach to assess the practical implementation of legal norms and the effectiveness of civic participation mechanisms.

Results. The analysis demonstrates that Uzbekistan has established a comprehensive legal and institutional framework regulating the activities of the third sector, which has significantly expanded in the context of reforms associated with Shavkat Mirziyoyev. A central element of this framework is the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations” (No. 763-I, April 14, 1999), which defines NGOs as voluntary, self-governing entities established to protect rights, promote democratic values, and achieve socially beneficial objectives (). The law also establishes procedures for state registration, outlines property rights, and guarantees the legal protection of NGO activities.

In addition, the constitutional framework ensures the protection of civil society institutions and prohibits unlawful interference in their activities, providing equal legal opportunities for participation in public life. Complementing this, legislation on public control introduces mechanisms for civic oversight over state bodies, thereby expanding the functional role of civil society actors in governance processes.

The institutional structure of the third sector in Uzbekistan is characterized by a combination of classical civil society organizations and traditional forms of self-governance. In particular, the Mahalla system occupies a unique position, functioning as an intermediary between the state and citizens and contributing to the implementation of social support and local governance initiatives. This creates a hybrid model of civil society that integrates formal legal institutions with historically rooted community practices. The functional analysis shows that third sector organizations perform several key roles, including the provision of social services, participation in public policy discussions, and implementation of community-based initiatives. At the same time, mechanisms of public participation such as public consultations and civic oversight have been formally institutionalized through legislative reforms.

However, despite the existence of a developed legal framework, a number of challenges persist. Administrative procedures related to registration and reporting remain relatively complex, and the practical implementation of legal guarantees is not always consistent. These factors indicate a gap between formal legal provisions and their application in practice, which limits the full realization of the potential of the third sector in Uzbekistan.

Conclusion. The study confirms that the third sector in Uzbekistan has evolved into an increasingly significant component of civil society, supported by a developing legal framework and institutional reforms associated with Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The expansion in the number of registered non-governmental non-profit organizations exceeding 10,000—indicates a steady process of institutionalization and growing civic engagement. The legal basis of the third sector

is primarily defined by the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations” (No. 763-I, April 14, 1999), which establishes the fundamental principles of NGO activity, including voluntary participation, self-governance, and legal protection. In parallel, the Law “On Public Control” introduces formal mechanisms of civic oversight, thereby strengthening the role of civil society in governance and enhancing public participation. At the same time, the Uzbek model of civil society remains hybrid in nature, combining modern institutional forms with traditional structures such as the Mahalla system. This feature contributes to social cohesion and local governance but also shapes a specific pattern of interaction between the state and civil society.

Despite the existence of a relatively comprehensive legal framework, a number of systemic challenges persist, including administrative barriers, limited financial sustainability, and varying degrees of institutional independence. These issues highlight the gap between formal legal guarantees and their practical implementation. Overall, while Uzbekistan has made substantial progress in strengthening the third sector, further legal and institutional reforms are necessary to enhance its autonomy, effectiveness, and capacity to function as a fully independent actor within a democratic society, in line with international standards.

References:

1. Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom in the World 2023: Uzbekistan*. Washington, DC.
2. International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL). (2023). *Civic Freedom Monitor: Uzbekistan*.
3. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Uzbekistan*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2022). *Civil Society and Governance in Uzbekistan*. New York: UNDP.

5. World Bank. (2022). *Uzbekistan Country Partnership Framework 2022–2026*. Washington, DC.
6. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2021). *Civil Society Development in Central Asia*. Vienna: OSCE.
7. AidData. (2022). *Civic Space in Uzbekistan (2010–2021)*. Williamsburg, VA.
8. Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2014). *On Public Control*.
9. Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2023). *New edition*.
10. Presidential Decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2017). *On the Strategy of Actions for the Further Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan (PF-4947)*.
11. Human Rights Watch. (2022). *World Report 2022: Uzbekistan*.
12. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). (2021). *Transition Report: Uzbekistan*.
13. USAID. (2021). *Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*.
14. Fowler, A. (2013). *Striking a Balance: A Guide to Enhancing the Effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisations in International Development*. London: Earthscan.
15. Mercer, C. (2002). NGOs, civil society and democratization: A critical review. *Progress in Development Studies*, 2(1), 5–22.