

THE ROLE OF SELF-GOVERNMENT BODIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract. *This article provides a thorough theoretical and practical analysis of the role of self-governing bodies—particularly mahallas, citizens' assemblies, and public organizations—in the formation and development of civil society. Within the context of ongoing democratic reforms in Uzbekistan, increasing civic engagement, enhancing the significance of the mahalla institution, and establishing an effective mechanism of mediation between the state and society are considered among the key objectives. The article examines the functions of self-governing bodies, their legal foundations, and their interactions with civil society institutions. It also analyzes their contributions to enhancing the social, economic, and cultural activity of the population. Furthermore, based on comparative analysis with advanced international practices, the article identifies both the strengths and weaknesses of the current system in Uzbekistan.*

In conclusion, the article presents concrete recommendations and proposals aimed at unlocking the full potential of self-governing bodies in strengthening civil society. This scientific work may serve as a valuable resource for researchers in the field of social sciences, professionals in public administration, and the broader audience interested in the development of civil society.

Keywords: *Civil society, self-governing bodies, mahalla institution, public governance, civic engagement, democratic participation, social institutions, local governance, legal foundations, social cooperation, digital governance, mahalla system, international experience, civic culture, state-society partnership.*

Introduction

The formation of a democratic state and civil society remains one of the priority directions in the socio-political development of the Republic of Uzbekistan today. Civil society is a system of conditions created for citizens to voluntarily unite, actively participate in social life, independently express and protect their interests. Its successful formation and functioning depend on the effective operation of mechanisms that ensure balanced relations between the state and society. In this regard, self-governing bodies occupy a special place as the main link of civil society. Self-governing bodies are democratic institutions that serve the interests of citizens at the local level and operate on a public basis. They perform functions such as maintaining social stability in society, increasing civic activity, supporting citizens' initiatives, and solving local issues in cooperation with state authorities. In particular, in Uzbekistan, the mahalla institution, with its historical roots and modern form harmonized with national traditions, further strengthens the role and significance of these bodies in the formation of civil society.

Today, the improvement of the self-governance system of citizens, the strengthening of its legal foundations, the modernization of its organizational structure, and the encouragement of local initiatives open up broader opportunities for the development of civil society in our

country. Within the framework of the idea of “New Uzbekistan – a new stage of development” put forward by our President, the mahalla system and other self-governing institutions are recognized as effective tools in governing society. Therefore, their potential is invaluable not only in addressing local problems, but also in shaping civic consciousness, raising legal culture, ensuring transparency, and strengthening social justice.

This article provides a scientific analysis of the role of self-governing bodies in the development of civil society, their legal and regulatory framework, institutional structures, mechanisms of activity, their impact on social life, existing problems, and ways to overcome them. In addition, analytical views based on local and international experience are presented, and practical proposals are put forward. This research is of great importance in studying civil society institutions in depth, supporting their development, and strengthening social stability and participatory governance in society.

Literature Review and Scientific Discussion

The Role of the Self-Governance System in the Formation of Civil Society

As stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, increasing citizens' activity in state and social life and widely involving them in socio-political processes are essential factors of democratic development. Civil society institutions, in particular self-governing bodies, serve as the main instrument in achieving this goal. They ensure citizens' direct participation in expressing local interests, social protection, educational and cultural activities, and issues of territorial development. In Uzbekistan, the system of self-governance, especially the functioning of the mahalla institution, has been formed on the basis of centuries-old historical traditions, while during the years of independence its legal and organizational foundations were further strengthened. The Law “On Citizens' Self-Government Bodies” (1993, revised edition – 2013) and other normative documents clearly defined the powers of mahallas and citizens' assemblies. As a result, social institutions that mediate between the state and society were established. Furthermore, the “New Uzbekistan” Development Strategy (2022–2026) has placed special emphasis on strengthening civil society, expanding the powers of self-governing bodies, and ensuring their financial independence. The reforms in this area contribute to solving socio-economic problems of the population at the local level and encourage citizens to actively participate in governance.

Literature Review

Scientific research conducted on this topic has examined the role of the self-governance system in the development of civil society from different perspectives. In particular, G.S. Saidov (2021), in his legal analysis, revealed the constitutional status of the mahalla institution.

According to him, the mahalla, as the initial link of civil society, is the most important element of social governance.

Doctor of Social Sciences Sh.X. Qodirov (2020) emphasized the role of the mahalla in social control, highlighting that this system is an important instrument in raising citizens' legal culture and civic activity. Likewise, S.S. Haydarov (2019), analyzing foreign experiences in his works, provided recommendations on strengthening civil society through local self-governing bodies.

From the perspective of international practice, the UN Social Development Reports (2021, 2023) underline that the functioning of local governance institutions on the principles of inclusiveness, transparency, and participation is a crucial factor in strengthening civil society.

Scientific Discussion

The above-mentioned analyses show that the interrelation between civil society institutions and self-governing bodies is a necessary condition for democratic development. In the context of Uzbekistan, this interrelation finds its expression primarily through the strong social foundation of the mahalla institution. Mahalla chairpersons, public commissions, preventive inspectors, and other actors create a system for identifying the needs and problems of the population and taking practical measures accordingly.

However, existing challenges — bureaucratic barriers, limited financial resources, and staff shortages in certain regions — hinder the full realization of the potential of the self-governance system. This sets specific tasks before the scientific community and political scientists, such as:

- reviewing the powers of self-governing bodies;
- digitalizing and enhancing transparency;
- strengthening civic consciousness by teaching citizens to express and defend their interests.

As a result, self-governing bodies can become the real foundation of a genuine civil society. In this regard, scientific research, practical reforms, and social innovations must be harmonized in a single direction.

Analysis of International Experience

The role of self-governing bodies in the formation and sustainable development of civil society is regarded as an important practice not only in Uzbekistan but also in developed and developing countries. Although approaches differ in terms of the structure, scope of authority, and financial independence of these institutions, their functional essence in promoting civil society shares common features. Below are analyses of several advanced foreign experiences.

1. The German Experience

In Germany, the local self-governance system forms the basis of the federal structure and is defined as a constitutional right. According to the principle of “communal autonomy,” each municipality (city, town, village) has the authority to independently manage financial, administrative, and organizational activities within its territory. Citizens participate directly in shaping the budget and in making important decisions, ensuring their real involvement in governance. Moreover, “citizens’ initiatives” are highly developed in Germany, enabling the public to continuously evaluate state activities.

2. The Japanese Experience

In Japan, citizens’ active participation in social life is reflected particularly through local self-governing groups known as Chounaikai. These groups are established on a voluntary basis and engage in community dialogue, infrastructure issues, social services, and the development of civic culture. Japan’s self-governing bodies operate on the basis of a high level of collective culture and discipline. The state does not directly finance these groups but supports their initiatives, thereby encouraging grassroots participation.

3. The South Korean Experience

In South Korea, “resident councils” and “neighborhood committees” play an important role in the development of civil society. They serve as intermediaries between the state and society. In each district or neighborhood, residents’ assemblies are regularly held, and projects are planned on the basis of public opinion. Since the 2000s, the “participatory budgeting” program has enabled citizens to directly take part in financial decision-making. This has contributed to building public trust in the state and has shown positive results in combating corruption.

4. The French and Swedish Experiences

In France, local self-governing bodies enjoy broad democratic powers, and citizens are involved in governance through public councils. In Sweden, “communes” are tasked primarily with representing the interests of the population and ensuring the fair distribution of social services. In these countries, civil society institutions promote the principles of social justice, equality, and inclusiveness.

Conclusion

Research and analysis show that self-governing bodies are one of the key institutions of civil society. Their activities play an important role in ensuring social stability, representing and protecting the rights and interests of citizens, involving them in governance, as well as building a reliable bridge between the state and society. In particular, under the conditions of Uzbekistan, the mahalla institution demonstrates practical results not only in social control but also in legal education, youth engagement, and social protection. At the same time, existing challenges—such as the inconsistency between legal powers and practical capacities, limitations in financial and human resources, and the low level of citizen participation—hinder self-governing bodies from making a full contribution to the development of civil society. The analysis of foreign experience indicates that strengthening local self-government institutions and actively involving them in reform and digitalization processes can establish a solid foundation for civil society.

Recommendations

1. Improving the legal framework

It is necessary to develop new legislative acts that clearly define the powers of self-governing bodies, simplify their operational mechanisms, and enhance their effectiveness.

2. Ensuring financial independence

Mahalla and citizens’ assemblies should be granted the ability to use local budget funds independently. Alongside state subsidies, mechanisms of sponsorship, social orders, and grants should be further developed.

3. Enhancing human capacity

Regular training courses, workshops, and webinars should be organized for mahalla chairpersons, secretaries, commission members, and other staff. Special attention should be given to developing skills in digital governance and social project management.

4. Expanding citizen participation

Mechanisms such as mahalla meetings, surveys, and “participatory budgeting” should be employed to expand public involvement in governance and engage citizens in decision-making processes.

5. Ensuring digitalization and transparency

Mechanisms should be introduced to provide open access to information on the activities of mahallas and citizens' assemblies, receive appeals through online platforms, and publish reports and decisions for public oversight.

6. Studying and applying international experience

The practices of countries such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea in ensuring direct citizen participation in local governance should be thoroughly studied, and practical models adapted to the context of Uzbekistan should be developed.

7. Establishing a system of scientific and public monitoring

A system of evaluation by the academic community and the public should be introduced to monitor the activities of self-governing bodies. Developing clear assessment criteria and generating recommendations based on results will significantly improve efficiency.

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