

## **A POLITICAL STUDY ON THE NATURE OF UZBEKISTAN'S *MAHALLA* INSTITUTION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Traditional neighborhood associations in Uzbekistan, known as *mahalla*, have been remaining a significant part in the process of state construction and democratization since they were re-formalized in 1990th. Uzbekistan's first president Karimov often referred to *mahalla* as a traditional school of democracy which was capable of paving the way for further democratic transformations in Uzbekistan. Indeed, a reasonable part of administrative reforms in the post-Soviet Uzbekistan aimed at presenting *mahalla* as a significant component of local civil society and, thus, create a bright image of Eastern (Asian) democracy. In this context, Karimov regularly claimed that the civil society model in Uzbekistan would be alien and unviable without such vital segments as a collective consciousness, and recognition of the leading role of public authorities. In other words, civil society based on collective consciousness - a characteristic which traditionally unified people in the region, in sharp contrast to the Western individualism, was regarded as the most applicable model for achieving a common good. Hence, the *mahalla*, according to Karimov's thoughts, was a unique institution that could combine traditional elements with social governing.

In the Soviet period, after several unsuccessful attempts to eradicate *mahalla*, the socialist government reformed it and placed under own control. Even though *mahalla* lost most of its traditional functions, it still could exercise significant informal and unreviewable power to survive under Soviet rule. The Soviet laws did not offer any concrete definition for *mahalla* that could legitimize its activities.

In the post-independence period, policymakers reformed and strengthened *mahalla* from the constitutional structure perspective. In the process of formalization of *mahalla* as *de jure* autonomous citizens' self-government body, the policymakers adopted many statutes and regulations. A detailed analysis of the Uzbek constitution, laws, and regulations concerning the functioning of the *mahalla* will demonstrate that the legal reforms eventually led to serious contradictions, especially in the part of co-existence of *mahalla* with public institutions within the centralized power structure in Uzbekistan. Whereas present laws define *mahalla* as a non-governmental organization, they simultaneously delegate some competency to *mahalla* which, naturally, resembles to the functions of governmental agencies. On the one side, *mahalla* represent a self-governing organization with close ties to the state for performing administrative tasks. Such situation obviously contradicts to the mere nature of creating a civil society which would encourage democratic changes.

The state decided to combine *mahalla* within the state framework with the purpose of advancing public order in an ethnically heterogeneous environment. Onward, officials claimed that promotion of *mahalla* targeted a wider and more active involvement of population into the policy-making process. Up to the adoption of the law on *Citizens' Self-Governing Bodies*, *mahalla* regulated relations among residents with the support of informal, social norms. The introduction of this law led eventually to the blending of such informal standards with statutory provisions. As a result, traditional informal rules which existed for centuries within *mahalla* went through statutory-legal formalization. Hence, nowadays, *mahalla* operates under uncertain status as a local level provider of social welfare and, as an institution which may exercise social control. At present, the state continues to intervene in the affairs of the *mahalla* which prevents it from becoming a self-autonomous organization.

The purpose of the research is to explore the present state of *mahalla* in the framework of Uzbekistan's attempts to encourage self-governing organizations to play a greater role in its transition to democracy. Much of the dissertation examines the nature of *mahalla* from historical, sociological and legal perspectives, establishing that this institution continues to provide a great deal of social capital among residents while also bridging relations between the population and the state. This study also takes a closer look at how community-based organizations in other countries interact between society and government thereby linking the interests and concerns of local residents to state policy. By comparatively analyzing the practices of countries such as Japan and Indonesia, this dissertation develops a model to categorize the importance of the *mahalla* and its potential future relationship with the state.

While many scholars have primarily focused on the anthropologic, cultural, historical and social aspects of *mahalla*, this study includes analyzing some of the legal and political contradictions which offer a better picture of the nature of the *mahalla* in present day Uzbekistan. From this perspective, the dissertation investigates former President Islam Karimov's ideas on the role of *mahalla* in state construction and how these ideas led to the development of a unique legal framework that places this organization into a hybrid form of self-governing body. Karimov's notions led to a legal contradiction because of the conflict that arose between the political and practical values he placed on *mahalla*. From a political vantage point, he needed *mahalla* to represent an example of a self-governing body that could thrive within his framework of democratization; however, Karimov also needed this institution for practical reasons to help administrate some daily activities at the local level.

Moreover, this research includes data analysis from a comprehensive questionnaire specifically designed for this dissertation. The author distributed the survey, which included 41 questions answered on a scale, to 141 chairpersons of *mahallas* in four different regions of Uzbekistan. While mainly sociological in design, many of the questions offer insight into how *mahalla* leaders see the nature of this organization and its relation with the state. From the data, a cross sectional analysis between the answers from the representatives of rural versus urban *mahallas* indicates that those in the countryside continue to assist local governments more than those in the cities.

In addition, a comparative analysis of the neighborhood associations in Japan and Indonesia illustrates some of the differences in natures of these Asian concept community organizations, and provides a scale in which to place the Uzbek model. In today's context, the Japanese *chonaikai* represents a relatively autonomous neighborhood organization, while the Indonesian *rukun tetangga* and *rukun warga* (RT/RW) represent organizations with closer ties to the state. The combination of outcomes from the analysis of legal problems, data from the cross-sectional analysis, and comparison with other countries provides an original model to prognosticate possible future scenarios of the *mahalla* and its relationship with the state.

In general, the aim of the present study is to explore the current state of *mahalla* in the framework of Uzbekistan's attempts to encourage self-governing organizations to play a greater role in its transition to democracy. Three research questions were formulated from this exploratory study: What is the nature of the Uzbek *Mahalla* and its relationship with local government? To what extent might *mahalla* become a quasi-governmental or quasi-private institution? What are the possible future scenarios for *mahalla*? Through analysis, the dissertation provides two original points with respect to much of the examination of a nature of *mahalla*. First, the study offers both a description and the substantive reasons for the legal contradictions regarding *mahalla's* status as a hybrid organization. Second, a survey with *mahalla* chairpersons supports the picture of a neighborhood association presently shifting towards autonomy.