

IMPROVING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the key areas of transformation in public administration and democratic institutions within the Republic of Uzbekistan, framed by the New Uzbekistan strategy. It pays particular attention to the institutional, legal, and organisational changes aimed at fostering an effective, accountable, and human-centred governance model. The article analyses contemporary challenges related to the quality of management decision-making, institutional sustainability, and the critical need to cultivate a new management culture founded on principles of openness, professionalism, and innovation. Special emphasis is placed on the digitalisation of the public sector, the introduction of e-government, and the use of digital tools to enhance the transparency and accessibility of public services. The article also explores various forms and tools of public participation in governance, highlighting the significant role of civil society institutions and local self-government, including the mahalla system. It identifies key barriers to reform implementation, such as weak coordination among government bodies, fragmentation of the regulatory framework, and insufficient human resources. Based on this analysis, the article proposes practical recommendations for deepening democratic transformation, strengthening institutional potential, and improving the public administration system in the long term.

Keywords: *gender, gender equality, right to difference, gender approach, human rights, right to work, state, equal rights, society.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Uzbekistan has demonstrated a strong political commitment to modernising its public administration and strengthening democratic institutions. The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as president in 2016 marked a turning point, ushering in a new era of political and administrative development. Since then, the reform of the public administration system has become both comprehensive and consistent, aiming to build a more open, accountable, and socially oriented state.

The core principle guiding these reforms is to prioritise citizens' rights and interests, enhance the efficiency and transparency of government bodies, and actively involve society in governance processes. Amid escalating global challenges and a growing domestic demand for modernisation, Uzbekistan adopted the *Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy* (Presidential Decree, 2023). This strategic framework guides reforms across a broad spectrum of areas, from legislative changes to the digitalisation of public services.

A hallmark of Uzbekistan's current development stage is its systemic and institutional approach to implementing reforms. This approach encompasses both the administrative and organisational structures and the political and legal frameworks that underpin state functioning. Particular emphasis is placed on reinforcing the rule of law, improving the system

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of checks and balances, and developing mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making. In this context, efforts focus on expanding the powers of local authorities, fostering bottom-up initiatives, and bolstering the role of representative institutions, including parliament and local governments. These measures collectively aim to construct a sustainable and inclusive model of state-society interaction. This model is crucial for ensuring not only effective public administration but also genuine citizen engagement in shaping public policy, and it is considered vital for achieving long-term socio-political stability and sustainable development amidst global shifts and internal transformation.

The primary objective of this article is to analyse the key areas of transformation in public administration and democratic institutions within the Republic of Uzbekistan, specifically in the context of the “New Uzbekistan” modernisation course (Presidential Decree, 2022). The analysis focuses on the institutional, legal, and organisational changes designed to establish a human-centred, accountable, and effective governance model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The processes of transforming public administration and promoting democratisation are traditionally examined through the lenses of institutional theory, the concept of Good Governance, and approaches that emphasise participation and inclusive development. According to Fukuyama (2013), effective public administration is only achievable through a balanced combination of strong institutions, responsibility, and citizen participation. He further asserts that effective public administration necessitates a triad – strong institutions, the rule of law, and democratic accountability – all of which must be balanced. When one or more of these components weakens, it can lead to inefficiency or, in the worst-case scenario, authoritarianism, even within ostensibly democratic procedures. Maintaining this balance hinges on transparent government activities, clear and uniform application of laws, and consistent public oversight of the executive branch.

This assertion holds particular relevance. Democratic states typically feature highly developed governance mechanisms engineered to protect citizens' rights, ensure their involvement in the governance process, and increase the accountability of government structures. North (1990), and Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) place similar emphasis in their works, highlighting the pivotal role of inclusive political institutions in fostering sustainable development.

From a regional perspective, Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, are often seen as navigating a transitional phase from authoritarian to hybrid or inclusive form of governance. As Olcott (2005) and Collins (2006) observe, the successful transformation of the political-institutional environment in post-Soviet countries demands a profound restructuring of historically established administrative structures, which largely accounts for the difficulties encountered in implementing such reforms.

Reforms in Central Asian countries are ongoing and evolving. A new wave of transformations was initiated during the post-pandemic period. For example, Uzbekistan's “Development Strategy for 2022-2026” (Presidential Decree, 2022), and the “Administrative Reform Concept” (Presidential Decree, 2017) have set the course for institutional changes, outlining crucial provisions that define their framework and guidelines.

In Uzbekistan's local scientific literature, considerable attention is given to the implementation of the *Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy* and its impact on institutional improvements. The works of Bekmurodov (2023), Khusanov (2023, 2024), Rakhimova (2021), Sadieva (2024), and Yuldashev

(2022), offer analyses of the development of a human-centred approach in public administration, the formation of feedback mechanisms between the state and society, and the degree of civil society institutions' activity. These publications from the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan further explore the conceptual underpinnings of these reforms, including administrative reform, digitalisation, and anti-corruption measures. Despite the substantial body of existing research, there remains a continued need to thoroughly analyse the key areas and achievements of reforms in public administration and democratisation, as well as to identify persistent challenges and potential solutions. Special consideration must be given to Uzbekistan's unique cultural, historical, and administrative characteristics, which enable a more precise understanding of the specifics and nuances of the reforms being implemented.

RESEARCH METHODS

The methodological foundation of this study rests on a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach, integrating elements from political science, institutional economics, comparative public administration, and law. Both contemporary theoretical concepts of institutional transformation and empirical data reflecting the practice of public administration in Uzbekistan from 2017 to the present serve as the analytical base.

The primary methodological tools employed were, firstly, institutional analysis, used to study the processes of formation and transformation of both formal and informal public administration institutions. For this, we drew upon the works of North, Fukuyama, Acemoglu, and others. Secondly, a comparative method was utilised to contrast public administration reforms in Uzbekistan with similar transformations in other countries across the post-Soviet space and Central Asia. Thirdly, a systems approach enabled us to consider public administration as an integral system, encompassing political, legal, organisational, and communication elements. Fourthly, content analysis was conducted on the regulatory framework and strategic documents, including the Development Strategy "New Uzbekistan", presidential messages, decrees, and various reform concepts. Finally, a case analysis was performed on specific administrative and political initiatives, such as the introduction of the C5+ format, the digitalisation of public services, and the expansion of open interaction platforms like '*Davlat-Jamiyat*'. This research is also anchored in the principles of scientific objectivity, historicism, logical consistency, and critical analysis of sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The modernisation of the administrative and governance system stands as a priority area of state policy in Uzbekistan. The country has adopted several pivotal strategic documents, including the Concept of Administrative Reform, and the Development Strategy "Uzbekistan-2030", alongside laws designed to enhance civil service efficiency. The paramount emphasis is on fostering a human-centred approach, reorienting the public administration system to meet citizens' needs and expectations.

Digital transformation plays a particularly vital role in public administration reform. The establishment of a unified portal for public services, the expanded capabilities of the *E-Hukumat* platform, and the introduction of information systems for document management and interdepartmental collaboration are instrumental in reducing bureaucratic hurdles and combating corruption. Currently, 350 types of public services are accessible online through the

Single Interactive Portal of Public Services. These initiatives significantly contribute to increased citizen trust in the authorities and bolster social justice.

Simultaneously, reforms aim to optimise the structure of executive bodies, eliminate redundant functions, and clearly delineate powers across different government levels. Significant attention is also directed towards enhancing the professionalism of civil servants through robust training and retraining programs, notably those offered by the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Overall, Uzbekistan's experience serves as a compelling illustration of a progressive shift towards an open, effective, and partnership-based public administration model. A crucial stride in this direction was the adoption of the Presidential Decree "On additional measures to ensure openness of the activities of state bodies and organisations, as well as the effective implementation of public control" in 2021 (Presidential Decree, 2021). This decree is specifically designed to institutionalise transparency and accountability mechanisms within the public administration system. To ensure the enduring sustainability of these transformations, it is imperative to maintain institutional continuity, provide comprehensive support for reforms at all government levels, and actively broaden citizen participation in decision-making processes. Moreover, strengthening the role of educational and research institutions in public administration, alongside fostering international cooperation to facilitate the exchange of best practices and the adaptation of successful foreign experiences, holds particular significance.

A key development in this process was the establishment of the Agency for the Development of Civil Service under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (ARGOS) – a specialised body tasked with coordinating reforms in human resources management (HRM) policy. Subsequently, with the enactment of the "Law on State Civil Service" (Presidential Decree, 2022b), a competitive selection system for the civil service was introduced, marking a significant move toward building a professional and transparent state apparatus.

ARGOS carries out numerous critical tasks, including organising competitions, developing ethical standards for service, enhancing employee qualifications, and implementing performance assessment mechanisms for civil servants (Presidential Decree, 2022b). Its responsibilities also encompass:

- Implementing a unified state policy in the field of civil service.
- Developing and executing state programs and projects related to civil service.
- Coordinating, within its authority, the HRM activities of state bodies.
- Monitoring and analysing trends and prospects for civil service development, and formulating proposals for its improvement.
- Submitting mandatory recommendations to heads of state bodies for addressing identified violations of civil service legislation, along with their root causes and contributing factors.
- Implementing innovative methods of personnel management and human resource development within the civil service.
- Establishing and consistently refining a system of measurable indicators (key performance indicators) for assessing civil servant performance, analysing results, studying public opinion, and contributing to the formation of an open rating for heads of state bodies.
- Organising competitive selection processes for civil service personnel.

- Implementing and consistently improving information and communication technologies in the civil service, including creating a secure database of civil servants.
- Providing assistance in protecting the rights and legitimate interests of civil servants, and ensuring appropriate conditions for their work and social protection.
- Engaging in cooperation with foreign government bodies and international organisations in the civil service domain and participating in the negotiation of international treaties for the Republic of Uzbekistan in this area.

The tangible outcomes of these efforts are evident in the increased government effectiveness, as measured by the World Bank, and in the growing participation of civil society (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Government effectiveness index.²

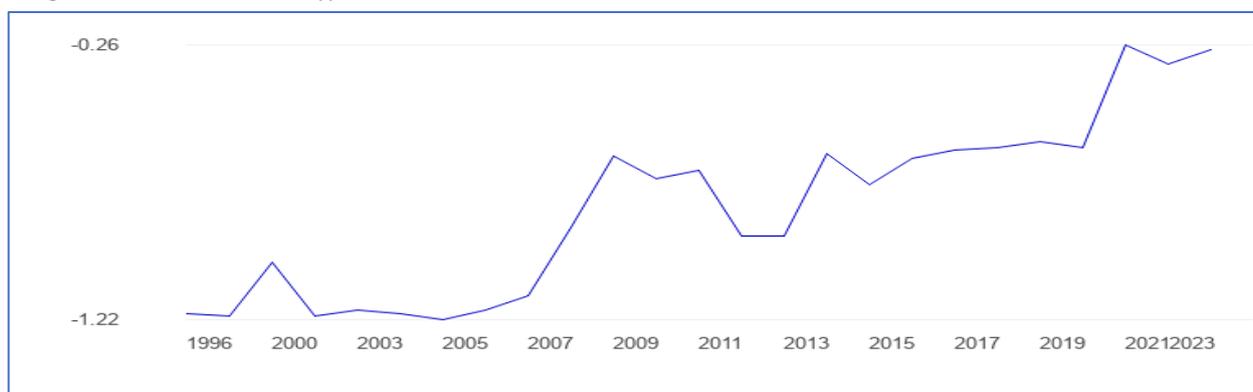
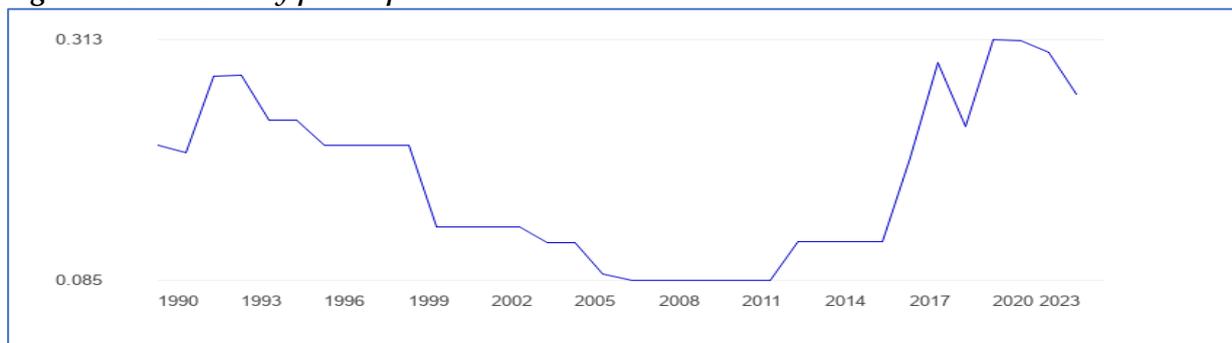


Figure 2. Civil society participation index.²



The institutional changes and the introduction of new mechanisms in public administration demand not only organisational solutions but also a fundamental re-evaluation of the state-civil society interaction model. In this context, the effectiveness of improving Uzbekistan's public administration system largely depends on forging transparent, trustworthy, and sustainable relations between the state and its citizens. Furthermore, the development of democratic processes plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of reforms, contributing significantly to the formation of a fair, inclusive, and citizen-oriented governance system.

² The latest Government Effectiveness Index score for Uzbekistan in 2023 was -0.28 points, representing an improvement from -0.33 points in 2022. For comparison, the global average stands at -0.04 points, based on data from 193 countries. Historically, Uzbekistan's average score from 1996 to 2023 is -0.83 points. The lowest value -1.22 points - was recorded in 2005, while the highest, -0.26 points, was achieved in 2021. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Uzbekistan/wb_government_effectiveness/

To gain a deeper understanding of these processes, it is insightful to consider institutional theory. North (1990) defines institutions as the “rules of the game” that shape the structure of social, economic, and political interactions. These rules include both formal institutions (such as laws and regulations) and informal institutions (like traditions, customs, and behavioural norms), all of which profoundly influence the conduct of individuals and organisations within society. North emphasises that the synergy between these two types of institutions – formal and informal – ultimately determines the quality of public administration. Formal institutions provide the bedrock of legal order and ensure compliance, while informal institutions dictate how these laws and regulations are perceived and enacted in practice.

In light of this, Uzbekistan's public administration reforms involve not only updating the legislative framework but also implementing significant shifts in management culture. The enactment of new laws and regulations aimed at liberalising the economy, enhancing public service quality, and strengthening anti-corruption measures represents just one part of the broader effort needed to create effective institutions. Crucially, this process also involves transforming the mindset of civil servants and the public administration system as a whole.

As North (1990) points out, institutions are vital for reducing uncertainty and building trust among diverse social groups. Therefore, beyond legislative and administrative changes, Uzbekistan is committed to fostering an institutional environment that facilitates improved interaction between the government and society. This involves both restructuring government bodies and nurturing a new culture within the civil service – one focused on citizens' long-term interests and the country's sustainable development.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), in their seminal work “Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty”, argue that the primary driver of sustainable and long-term national development is inclusive political institutions. By “inclusiveness,” the authors refer to a system where broad segments of the population actively participate in political decision-making, where access to opportunities is universally provided, and where mechanisms for holding authorities and elites accountable to society are firmly established. Such a structure helps prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a select few, thereby minimising the risks of corruption and political instability.

According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), inclusive institutions not only ensure fair resource distribution but also stimulate innovation and economic growth. Effective citizen participation in decision-making helps create a system that addresses societal problems and needs, ensuring that governmental decisions serve the long-term benefit of all citizens, not just a narrow elite. Unlike “extractive institutions,” which are predicated on an exploitative governance model, inclusive institutions foster conditions for human capital development, expand educational and economic opportunities, and strengthen trust among various social groups and the state.

Consequently, the reforms being carried out in Uzbekistan increasingly prioritise the principle of inclusiveness as a fundamental condition for improving the state system. Significant attention is devoted to introducing mechanisms that guarantee citizen participation in decision-making processes, alongside increasing the transparency and accountability of government agencies. Concurrently, efforts are made to create equal opportunities for all members of society, aligning with modern global trends in establishing effective and equitable institutions.

In the regional context, Olcott's research emphasises that Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, have a unique opportunity to undertake profound economic and institutional reforms. She observes that these states possess a "second chance" to modernise their political and economic systems, which, in turn, should encompass reforms to the judicial system and public administration (Olcott, 2005). Olcott underscores that such transformations are essential for creating more effective and transparent institutions capable of better serving citizens' interests and promoting economic growth.

These insights are particularly pertinent for modern Uzbekistan, where reforms are actively being implemented to enhance public administration, improve the quality of public services, and establish a more open and accessible administrative system. A particularly critical aspect of this transformation is the digitalisation of public administration, which boosts the accessibility and transparency of public services while reducing administrative barriers. As part of administrative procedure reform, electronic platforms are being introduced for citizen-government interaction, streamlining processes and making them more transparent.

Olcott (2005) highlights that successful reforms in Central Asia will necessitate not only changes in regulatory frameworks and improvements in state bodies' functioning but also significant shifts in the mentality of civil servants and in the public perception of the state's role in citizens' lives. These elements are especially relevant for Uzbekistan, a populous country in the region, where strengthening the rule of law and enhancing government accountability remain paramount tasks.

Collins (2006, p. 11) notes that informal institutions and elite agreements continue to exert a key influence in Central Asia's transitional regimes. Power often stems from unofficial and unstructured relationships among elites, complicating the process of democratisation and institutional strengthening. Under such conditions, sustainable transformations are only possible if these informal mechanisms are gradually supplanted by transparent and institutionalised forms of power that can provide more stable and predictable conditions for political and economic development.

Within the context of Uzbekistan, current governmental efforts are directed at diminishing the influence of informal institutions and fostering more institutionalised and structured forms of power. A crucial aspect of these endeavours is the introduction of accountability principles and the reinforcement of the rule of law. This is directly linked to modernising the judicial system, improving law enforcement, and creating open channels for citizen interaction with the state. These changes aim to cultivate a more predictable and transparent political and administrative environment, which is a prerequisite for sustainable political reform and economic growth.

Thus, Collins' approach – emphasising the replacement of informal agreements with formal and institutionalised power mechanisms – resonates strongly with the reforms actively underway in Uzbekistan. These reforms serve as the foundational basis for further changes designed to strengthen democratic institutions and foster a rule of law state.

The ongoing process of improving Uzbekistan's public administration system, targeting strengthened institutions and increased efficiency, is evident across numerous reforms. A key area is the digitalisation of public administration, intended to enhance service quality, boost transparency, and mitigate corruption risks. The introduction of electronic systems, such as the public services portal, effectively simplifies administrative procedures and improves citizen interaction with government agencies.

The government services portal (www.my.gov.uz) now provides access to over 1,000 administrative services, streamlining citizen engagement with government agencies and reducing corruption. This portal enables citizens to obtain electronic certificates and apply for documents, thereby decreasing bureaucratic barriers and increasing the transparency of governmental operations. The implementation of the E-Government system (Resolution, 2016), which forms part of a broader digitalisation strategy, also incorporates blockchain technologies for government registries. Notably, the Law on E-Government was enacted as early as 2015 (Presidential Decree, 2015).

Despite undeniable successes in digitalisation and administrative reforms, Uzbekistan still faces several challenges. One of the primary obstacles to full institutional transformation remains the influence of informal institutions and entrenched elite agreements that continue to shape political and economic decision-making. Consequently, many citizens still encounter bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient transparency in state structures.

A significant achievement of Uzbekistan's reforms has been the introduction of the electronic public procurement system. This measure has substantially increased the transparency of budget fund utilisation, reduced corruption risks, and strengthened the accountability of government agencies. The electronic platform for conducting tenders allows for tracking all stages of the procurement process – from submitting applications to concluding contracts – which aligns with international standards of good governance. Thus, the digitalisation of procurement has become a vital component in enhancing public administration's efficiency and openness.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has actively worked to bolster accountability and anti-corruption mechanisms. A pivotal step in this direction was the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Agency. Founded in accordance with the Presidential Decree “On additional measures to improve the anti-corruption system in Uzbekistan” dated June 29, 2020, the Agency is tasked with developing and implementing anti-corruption strategies and programs.

The reforms implemented in Uzbekistan are already yielding tangible results, increasing the level of accountability and transparency within government bodies and fostering improved state-citizen interaction. By reducing non-core functions and extensively integrating digital technologies, the structure of these bodies has been optimised by an average of 15 percent. Furthermore, 40 deputy heads' positions have been eliminated across 26 government bodies and institutions.

To reduce bureaucratic barriers and enhance public service delivery, modern management principles have been effectively introduced. This initiative has led to the cancellation of approximately 30 types of licenses and permits, the simplification of over 70 types of public services, and the elimination of requirements for more than 60 types of documents previously requested by government agencies.

It is also worth noting that significant civil service reforms have occurred in Uzbekistan recently. One key development was the adoption of the Law “On the State Civil Service”, in 2022, which regulates relations within the civil service sphere. The primary goal of this reform is to elevate the professionalism of civil servants and strengthen their accountability to society. Additionally, a mechanism for independent assessment of government agency effectiveness and service quality for citizens has been implemented.

SUMMARY

In recent years, Uzbekistan has made substantial strides in reforming its public administration. Initiatives such as the creation of the Anti-Corruption Agency, the implementation of electronic public procurement systems, and independent assessments of state bodies' performance have demonstrably increased government transparency and accountability. These measures have laid the groundwork for improving the quality of public services and reducing corruption.

Uzbekistan is actively adapting to international standards, which contributes to more effective interaction between government bodies and citizens. However, despite these successes, the reform process demands continuous refinement and adaptation to emerging challenges, both domestically and internationally.

CONCLUSION

Since 2016, Uzbekistan has pursued a consistent path toward improving its public administration system, with citizens' interests, openness, and accountability of authorities at its core. These changes directly reflect the strategic goals of building a fair and inclusive state.

The establishment of new institutions, including the Civil Service Development Agency, and the enactment of the law on the state civil service represent critical advancements in professionalising and modernising the state apparatus.

The increasing influence of democratic institutions – such as parliament, political parties, civil society, and the media – signals the emergence of a new model for state-society relations. Citizen participation in decision-making processes is becoming increasingly formalised and integrated into the system.

From an institutional economics perspective, the sustainability of these reforms is secured through the dynamic interplay of formal and informal institutions, which collectively shape the quality of public administration and public perception of the reforms.

The integration of inclusiveness, transparency, and fairness principles into public administration practices creates a solid foundation for long-term development, strengthening public trust in governmental institutions and fostering a rule of law state.

Nevertheless, challenges persist regarding institutional sustainability, the level of political culture, and the necessity for systematic evaluation of reform effectiveness. These aspects warrant further academic exploration and practical refinement. Overall, Uzbekistan is progressing positively, establishing conditions to curb corruption and enhance citizen trust in state institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to continue developing the institution of independent assessment for government bodies and to actively involve civil society in monitoring governmental activities. This will further solidify public trust in state institutions.

Expanding the use of digital technologies across all government processes, including taxation and social protection, is essential to make these services more convenient and transparent for citizens. Programs for training civil servants and enhancing their skills should be strengthened to ensure a consistently high level of professionalism in public management.

To improve the quality of services and boost citizen participation in decision-making, it is vital to guarantee the accessibility and transparency of information on government agencies' activities through digital channels.

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