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Urinboyev, Rustamjon

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Title: Public administration reforms in Uzbekistan: Myth or reality

Rustamjon Urinboyev

Abstract

Uzbekistan, after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, had publicly declared that it would adhere to democratic governance principles in designing and implementing its public administration policies. As a newly-independent state with democracy claims, Uzbekistan had tried to establish new democratic institutions with an effort to capture international community's attention and attract foreign direct investment. For a brief period during the first stages of nation-building process there was a widespread assumption that Uzbekistan would be able to build democratic institutions and market-based economy through reforming its public administration system.

Consequently, decentralization reforms had been launched in order to promote the efficiency of public administration at the local level. The main aim of these decentralization reforms was to abandon traditional communistic public administration system in which the public administration system was centrally-planned. Pre-Soviet institutions and popular traditions have been chosen as a basis for these public administration reforms. Accordingly, pre-Soviet Mahalla institutions (local community groups) presented themselves as feasible solutions. Prior to these reforms, mahallas heavily relied on social norms to enforce the cooperative behaviour in the community. The adoption of the Mahalla Law in 1993 (revised in 1999) has strictly formalized the activities of mahallas, thereby indirectly incorporating them into the system of public administration. Mahallas are no longer local informal institutions, now they have become the government's main agency responsible for implementing social welfare programs and maintaining social order and stability. In the light of growing economic, social and political challenges, mahallas have become the focal point of public policies where the law, social forces and informal economic structures come to interplay.

This paper uses mahalla institutions as a case study to examine the myths and realities of public administration reforms in Uzbekistan since 1991. It is argued that public administration reforms since 1991 have transformed mahalla into the comprehensive system of social control, and therefore, mahalla system can either promote democratic transformations or reinforce authoritarianism in Uzbekistan.