



Trends and Challenges In The Development of Civil Society In Uzbekistan

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/jsd.v3i1.4019>

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Received: 25-05-2025

Accepted: 25-06-2025

Published: 25-07-2025



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Abstract: Measures to deepen democratic transformations in Uzbekistan are characterized by gradual progress towards the formation of a civil society, the development of the country's state, legal and political system, and the creation of conditions for the free functioning of civil society institutions. This article analyzes the socio-political, legal, and economic issues in the process of building civil society in Uzbekistan, the reforms aimed at addressing these issues, and the role of the state's support in these reforms. The article examines the role of important civil society institutions, such as non-governmental non-profit organizations (NGOs) and mass media, their support by the state, citizen participation, and the challenges faced in developing the activities of these institutions.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Constitution, State, Laws, Civil Society, Citizens, Socio-Political, Legal, Economic Reforms, Social Partnership And Cooperation, Issues, Institutions, Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations, Mass Media.

Introduction

Civil society is a collective term for social structures, organizations, and associations of citizens that operate independently of the state. In such a society, human rights, legal culture, and civic engagement are held in high regard. In Uzbekistan, the establishment of a robust civil society is considered one of the top priorities for national development and social progress. Article 69 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan defines the foundation of civil society as follows: *"Institutions of civil society, including public associations and other non-governmental non-profit organizations, citizens' self-governing bodies, and mass media, constitute the foundation of civil society. The activities of civil society institutions shall be carried out in accordance with the law."* (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Konstitutsiyasi) A broader analysis of this provision indicates that various entities may be regarded as civil society institutions in Uzbekistan, such as non-governmental non-profit organizations (NGOs), mass media, human rights defenders and independent journalists, youth and women's associations, trade unions, and other public associations.

In this regard, the legal, social, and economic foundations of civil society are being strengthened, while efforts are also being made to increase civic participation and secure

state support for these initiatives. These goals are thoroughly articulated in the statements and works of the President of Uzbekistan. As emphasized in his writings:

"We have set ourselves the great goal of building a New Uzbekistan together with our people. In this process, the new idea that 'Society is the initiator of reforms' is increasingly becoming an integral part of our daily activities" (Мирзиёев, 2021). Furthermore, the Presidential Decree No. PF-60, dated January 22, 2022, titled *"On the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026"*, outlines the priority areas and implementation tasks for building a civil society in the country. This document affirms a strategic commitment to fostering civil society as a central component of national development (lex.uz).

Methodology

During Uzbekistan's transition toward a civil society, the development of civil society institutions has been examined from various philosophical and sociological perspectives. Notable scholars such as Sh. Mamadaliev, S. Otamuratov, B. Toichiyev, J.S. Ramatov, F. Musaev, R.Z. Jumayev, S.A. Juraev, M. Qirgizboev, S.D. Narkulov, I. Ergashev, A. Utamuratov, G. Kochkorova, and A.A. Khuseynova have explored the theoretical foundations and challenges of this development. Additionally, political aspects of civil society have been studied by researchers like A. Jalilov, N. Juraev, S. Juraev, T. Matibaev, J. Mavlonov and D. Ernazarov.

The scientific, theoretical, and legal bases for cooperation between the state and civil society institutions have been thoroughly investigated by legal scholars such as A.Kh. Saidov, A. Azizkhojaev, S. Adilkhodjaeva, Kh. Boboev, Sh. Jalilov, Z. Islomov, F. Mukhitdinova, Kh. Odilqoriyev, A. Dadasheva, E. Kholova, and Sh. Urazaev. In particular, Professor A.Kh. Saidov has conducted in-depth research on the organizational and legal framework of non-governmental institutions within both national and international legal systems. His work emphasizes the legal foundations of non-governmental social institutions and the extent to which they align with international standards [4]. Political science scholar M. Qirgizboev, in his monograph *"Civil Society: Theory and Foreign Experience,"* provides a comprehensive analysis of the non-governmental sector. He highlights not only the socially significant functions of this sector but also its potential to serve as a counterbalance to the political actions of the state in specific areas [5, p. 176]. Doctor of Philosophy F. Musaev, in his academic work on the philosophical and legal foundations of building a democratic state, focuses on the role of non-governmental organizations in advancing popular sovereignty. Meanwhile, Sh.U. Yakubov, in his doctoral dissertation, proposes practical recommendations for improving the legal mechanisms of cooperation between state institutions and civil society (Mycaev, 2007). Professor A. Utamuratov has put forward views on the historical and cultural development stages of civil society institutions in Uzbekistan, examining their evolution and relevance in contemporary practices (Ўтамуродов, 2018).

A review of contemporary national literature shows that the issue of civil society and the mechanisms and factors ensuring its practical implementation has been extensively

analyzed within the field of political science. To address these issues, this study employed a combination of research methods, including: Problem-chronological method – aimed at identifying the historical emergence and development of civil society, as well as the specific forms and methods through which this process has been shaped over time.

Comparative-historical method – used to examine the evolution of the concept of civil society and to emphasize the growing complexity in defining and interpreting related theoretical constructs. Concrete-sociological research method – applied to explore how the concept of civil society manifests in the interactions between the individual, society, and the state, as well as to identify emerging trends and changes within these relationships.

Logical method – utilized to establish clear and systematic connections between existing phenomena and processes. By combining these methods, the article provides a more accurate and in-depth analysis of the existing challenges, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the development and functioning of civil society in Uzbekistan.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has paid significant attention to the development of civil society. For example, within the framework of reforms implemented between 2017 and 2025, greater opportunities have been created for a number of NGOs and independent mass media. In this regard, it is crucial to examine the legal foundations for the development of civil society in Uzbekistan and assess the possibilities for their practical implementation. A number of legal documents have been adopted to support the development of civil society in Uzbekistan. These include the laws “On Public Associations in the Republic of Uzbekistan,” “On Trade Unions, Their Rights and Guarantees of Activity,” “On Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations,” “On Citizens’ Self-Government Bodies,” “On Political Parties,” “On Public Funds,” “On Financing Political Parties,” “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” “On Guarantees of the Activities of Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations,” “On Mass Media,” as well as numerous presidential decrees, decisions, and regulatory acts adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers (Кўлланма, 2018).

Importantly, the Concept for the Development of Civil Society in Uzbekistan for 2021–2025 was approved, which outlines several priority areas, including: Improving the legal framework of civil society institutions; Ensuring active participation of civil society institutions in public administration; Expanding the involvement of NGOs in the implementation of state social projects; Enhancing the legal regulations governing the activities of NGOs.

In our opinion, the fundamental principles for improving civil society in Uzbekistan are enshrined in the Constitution. For instance, Article 72 states: *“The state ensures respect for the rights and legitimate interests of non-governmental non-profit organizations and provides them with equal legal opportunities to participate in public life. Interference by state bodies and officials in the activities of non-governmental non-profit organizations, as well as interference by non-governmental organizations in the activities of state bodies and officials, is not permitted.”* (O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Konstitutsiyasi). In addition, Article 115 of the Constitution outlines one of the functions of the executive branch: *“The Cabinet of Ministers of the*

Republic of Uzbekistan implements measures to support civil society institutions, ensures their participation in the development and implementation of programs for socio-economic development and social partnership” (O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Konstitutsiyasi).

Furthermore, Presidential Decree No. PF-124, adopted in 2024, aims to further improve the system of state support for civil society institutions. As a result, the legal status of these institutions has been further strengthened. The main areas of state support include: Increasing the participation of civil society institutions in public and state life; Promoting their role in addressing pressing societal issues based on real community needs; Developing mutually beneficial partnerships between state bodies and civil society institutions; Encouraging effective public oversight by civil society institutions in all spheres of public life; Establishing and strengthening connections with compatriots abroad and foreign-based associations; Enhancing the material and technical base of civil society institutions and creating favorable legal and organizational conditions for their activities (O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Konstitutsiyasi).

Social partnership between sectors is also gaining momentum in Uzbekistan. Among its key forms are the participation of representatives from NGOs and other civil society institutions in working groups, commissions, and advisory bodies under state agencies; the signing of social partnership agreements and contracts; the joint development and implementation of projects and programs; and the exchange of information and mutual support. The state plays a vital role in supporting these efforts (lex.uz). Special attention is being given to increasing the role of civil society institutions in socio-economic development and in strengthening effective communication between various social groups and public authorities. National and international conferences contribute significantly to this process by fostering dialogue between the state and society (lex.uz). Moreover, civil society institutions are receiving financial support. The volume of state subsidies, grants, and social orders allocated to non-governmental organizations increased by 1.2 times in 2021, with plans to raise this figure by 1.8 times by 2025. According to the Law “On Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations,” *“Non-governmental non-profit organizations may finance their activities through membership fees, grants, donations, and other sources”* (lex.uz).

Result and Discussion

In recent years, financial support funds for NGOs have been established under the councils of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the regions, and the city of Tashkent. For instance, in 2021, 16 billion soums were allocated for this purpose, and by 2025, this amount is expected to increase to 70 billion soums. In addition, the process of attracting international grants has been simplified. Notably, the requirement for NGOs to obtain permission from justice authorities was abolished, and the volume of international grants has exceeded 125 million USD. A *state social order* refers to a government assignment for the implementation of socially significant projects or activities by concluding a contract between a state agency and a non-governmental non-profit organization or another civil society institution (lex.uz). In order to effectively develop civil society, it is essential to

establish legal guarantees and ensure equal access to financial resources for the non-governmental sector.

Furthermore, additional reforms are being carried out in Uzbekistan to support the development of civil society. In particular, the Law “On Social Partnership” is currently under revision, which is expected to further increase NGO participation in state social projects. The analysis of key trends in the development of civil society reveals several positive changes and ongoing reforms. For instance, there is a growing emphasis on transparency and openness—state bodies are strengthening cooperation with civil society institutions. The e-government system has made public services more transparent and accessible. The scope of NGO activities is also expanding. Currently, more than 10,000 NGOs operate in Uzbekistan, most of which are engaged in the social sector. At the same time, the growing activity of the media—including independent news platforms and journalists—contributes to strengthening dialogue between the state and society. The development of electronic platforms and the blogosphere has expanded opportunities for expressing critical opinions and discussing social issues.

At this point, it is worth briefly discussing the current state, development trends, and challenges of NGOs—the most widespread institution of civil society. In Uzbekistan, non-governmental non-profit organizations (NGOs) are considered one of the key institutions of civil society. They operate in various fields—social, economic, cultural, and educational. Today, NGOs are evolving into vital structures that support different segments of the population, protect human rights, and participate in the implementation of state policies. It is important to recognize that the primary function of NGOs—as a vital component of civil society—is to conduct public oversight over the activities of state authorities. It can be stated that the role of NGOs is particularly evident during the development of democratic processes, as they support and reinforce democratization efforts (Фуқаролик жамияти асослари).

In 1991, only 95 non-governmental non-profit organizations (NGOs) were registered in Uzbekistan. By 2023, this number had reached approximately 9,500, clearly indicating a dynamic and accelerated growth in the sector over the past few decades. To support the development of NGOs, the government has introduced a range of legislative reforms, including simplifying the registration process and establishing financial support mechanisms.

The development trends of these institutions are observed in several directions: Legislative reforms: Based on decrees and decisions adopted in 2021, a number of measures aimed at enhancing NGO development have been implemented. Infrastructure improvement: By 2023, 14 “Houses of NGOs” were established across Uzbekistan, increasing access to dedicated spaces for NGO activities. Capacity building: In 2022, 100 NGO leaders received specialized training at the Academy of Public Administration, and a total of 317 seminar-trainings were organized for NGO representatives. Several key factors have positively influenced the growth of NGOs in Uzbekistan’s civil society: Government support – allocation of grants and the introduction of mechanisms for public oversight;

Increased civic engagement – citizens are becoming more aware of their rights and showing greater interest in participating in social projects; Educational programs – training and upskilling courses are being held for NGO leaders and staff.

However, NGOs still face several pressing challenges, including: Financial sustainability – some NGOs struggle to secure the necessary funding to ensure uninterrupted operations; Bureaucratic barriers – complex administrative procedures during registration or activity implementation; Legal ambiguities – unclear legal frameworks can lead to difficulties in navigating regulations and ensuring compliance.

Naturally, the direct involvement of NGOs in state affairs significantly contributes to the development of civil society institutions and strengthens their influence. This, in turn, helps address pressing issues on the national agenda, enhances public trust in government institutions, and reinforces two-way communication between the state and society, based on principles of transparency, openness, and mutual respect. It also improves the effectiveness of cooperation among civil society institutions, businesses, and government bodies (Пасулов, 2020). NGOs in Uzbekistan have also played an active role in preserving and restoring historical and cultural heritage. Currently, 4,308 archaeological sites, 2,079 architectural monuments, 694 works of art, and 395 landmarks—totaling 7,476 cultural heritage objects—are under state protection. In this field, various NGOs established in the years of independence have made notable contributions, including the *Mahalla Charitable Fund*, the *International Amir Temur Foundation*, the *International Bobur Foundation*, the *Alisher Navoi Foundation*, the *Golden Heritage Foundation*, the *Martyrs' Remembrance Foundation*, and the *Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Sacred Sites under the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan* (ИНСОПОВ, 2021).

It is also worth noting that according to international comparisons, particularly using the methodology of Canadian NGOs, the share of government funding in the total budget of NGOs in Canada is higher than the global average (global average: 35%). In Canada, 85% of public support for NGOs comes from the budgets of provinces and territories. Moreover, to stimulate civic engagement, the Canadian government widely employs indirect funding through tax incentives for NGOs (Маткаримова, 2022).

The media plays a significant role in the development of civil society in Uzbekistan. As of 2024, there are more than 1,900 mass media outlets operating in the country. These include print publications, online media, television and radio channels, as well as blogging platforms. To support and further develop the media sector, various state programs and legal frameworks have been implemented. In recent years, a number of positive trends have emerged in the development of media in Uzbekistan. Firstly, there has been a noticeable move toward strengthening media independence, as the government seeks to foster mass media as an independent institution. This effort has been supported by the adoption of laws guaranteeing freedom of information and protection of journalists' rights. Another key trend is the digitalization of media, with state bodies and organizations transitioning their official print publications to electronic formats. By 2026, special

platforms are planned to be launched to enhance the subscription system and the development of electronic media products.

Support for journalists and bloggers is also increasing. For instance, national awards such as the “Golden Pen” prize are awarded to outstanding media representatives, including cash prizes and vehicles, which further incentivize professional excellence. The media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion. Special working groups have been established in cooperation with state agencies to disseminate information and study public opinion. A dedicated information-sharing system has been introduced among journalists and bloggers to report on government activities. Additionally, several systematic measures have been introduced to ensure citizens have quick and complete access to information about government agencies. These include ministerial websites, press conferences, briefings, media collaborations, and “open” public meetings (Усмонов, 2019).

Scholars analyzing public oversight processes also attempt to assess the role of the media as a mediating institution in the dialogue between the state and society. In this regard, enhancing the capacity and cooperation of media with public control actors can contribute to the development of civil society analysis centers in the future (Зоирова, 2019). However, despite these advancements, certain challenges and barriers remain in enhancing the media’s role in building civil society. For example, independent media sometimes face restrictions and encounter difficulties in cooperating with government agencies. The financial limitations of the advertising market also prevent many media outlets from operating with full independence, as they lack sufficient financial resources and advertising revenues. Additionally, censorship and limited access to information remain issues in some cases, particularly when it comes to freely accessing data or covering sensitive topics.

Conclusion

International experience demonstrates that the development of a strong civil society requires a well-formed legal framework, state support for civil institutions, particularly financial assistance, their collaboration with government bodies, and the effective functioning of numerous public organizations. In Uzbekistan, significant efforts are being made in these directions. Notably, activity in the civil society sector is growing.

The legal and financial foundations of civil society in Uzbekistan are being gradually improved. The government is focusing on providing material and legal support to NGOs and public organizations. However, ensuring the full independence of civil society institutions, enhancing their effectiveness, and further expanding their access to financial resources remain urgent tasks.

Civil society in Uzbekistan is steadily developing, but financial and legal barriers still exist. The government can further advance this sector by ensuring transparency, creating a favorable environment for NGOs, and increasing public engagement. The number of NGOs in Uzbekistan has sharply increased, making them an essential part of civil society. While the government is implementing measures to support them, issues

such as financial stability and administrative processes persist. In the coming years, strengthening collaboration between the state and society will be necessary to enhance the effectiveness of NGOs.

Uzbekistan is undergoing a significant phase in the development of mass media, gaining independence and progressing in digital transformation processes. The government is taking steps to support journalists and improve information service mechanisms; however, obstacles still remain for independent media.

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