

The Export Potential Of Uzbekistan's Experience In The Process Of Administrative Reforms In Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the administrative reforms implemented in the Republic of Uzbekistan during 2020-2024, including the optimization of institutional structures, the establishment of independent anti-corruption agencies, and approaches to strengthening local governance. It analyzes how Uzbekistan's experience may be relevant and adaptable for neighboring Central Asian countries-Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan-while emphasizing that the success of such reforms largely depends on each country's political and social context and institutional stability. The article also highlights the role of international organizations-such as the UNDP, OSCE, and the World Bank-in recognizing Uzbekistan's reform efforts as a form of soft power that contributes to regional development and stability. The analysis concludes that while Uzbekistan's model is potentially exportable, its success depends on contextual adaptation in each state.

Keywords: - Uzbekistan, reform, governance, locality, corruption, agency, development, modernization, institution, Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020-2024, comprehensive reforms were implemented in the public administration system and administrative structure of the Republic of Uzbekistan. During this period, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, important steps were taken to modernize governance, streamline government bodies, introduce digital technologies, combat corruption, and increase the efficiency of public services under the concept of "New Uzbekistan." Through these reforms, the government of Uzbekistan aims to transform public administration into a people-oriented and open system and establish the principle of "Human interests above all else." The following is an analysis of the content, stages, and

results of the administrative reforms implemented in 2020-2024, as well as their export potential for Central Asian countries.

METHOD

The administrative reforms implemented in Uzbekistan since 2017 are aimed at improving the quality of public administration, improving the system of providing services to citizens, and institutional renewal, forming a unique model in the region. The Action Strategy for 2017-2021 and the Concept of Administrative Reforms for 2022, announced by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, formed the legal and conceptual basis for this process. [1] Any change and innovation in the state must serve the well-being of the people. The essence of administrative reforms primarily

consisted of modernizing the system of public administration and increasing its efficiency. Within the framework of these reforms, special attention was given to optimizing the structure of the government, reducing excessive bureaucratic layers, improving human resource policies, digitizing public services, and implementing strict anti-corruption measures. A phased approach was applied: initially, legislative and strategic documents were developed; subsequently, institutional structures were updated, followed by the practical implementation phase. Important legal foundations were established in the fields of public administration and the fight against corruption. Notably, in 2020, a Presidential Decree led to the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Agency.[2] During this period, the “Digital Uzbekistan - 2030” strategy was adopted, designating the development of e-government and the digital economy as strategic priorities.

The Action Strategy for 2017-2021 was successfully completed, and based on its outcomes, the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026 was adopted. In this new strategy, accelerating administrative reforms in the area of state and societal development was designated as a top priority, with a special focus on the transition to a “compact and efficient system of public administration.” [3]

In 2024, the implementation of decisions adopted as part of the next phase of administrative reforms is being closely monitored. Key issues on the agenda include staffing state bodies through open competition with highly qualified personnel, fully establishing the income declaration system for civil servants, and strengthening local governance structures in the regions.

According to UNDP assessments, ensuring the continued success of these reforms requires the full institutionalization of anti-corruption mechanisms-particularly the comprehensive introduction of asset and income declaration systems for public officials-as well as further improvement of public service delivery at the local level.[4]

As a result of administrative reforms, significant changes were introduced in the system of public administration and institutional structures. Starting from January 1, 2023, with the implementation of the first stage of administrative reforms, the number of executive bodies subordinate to the government was significantly reduced-from 61 to 28. As a result, the number of

ministries within the central executive branch was decreased from 25 to 21. Several agencies were fully dissolved, and their functions were transferred to the relevant ministries and committees.

For instance, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Finance were merged to form the unified Ministry of Economy and Finance. Similarly, the Ministry of Preschool Education and the Ministry of Public Education were merged into the new Ministry of Preschool and School Education. Under the new structure, the government now consists of 21 ministries, 5 committees, and several agencies and inspections. Each ministry has been designated as the principal body responsible for implementing state policy within its domain, with subordinate committees, agencies, and inspections placed under its direct authority.

In order to streamline the administrative apparatus, the central office staff of all ministries and agencies was reduced by up to 30%. The senior leadership structure within the government was also revised. The number of Deputy Prime Ministers was optimized: instead of the previous 8 Deputy Prime Ministers and 3 advisors, only 4 Deputy Prime Ministers remain.

Importantly, under the new system, Deputy Prime Ministers are no longer allowed to simultaneously head a ministry or hold any other official position. They do not directly manage the activities of ministries and agencies. This reform serves to ensure a clear distribution of administrative powers and to eliminate functional overlap within the executive branch. As part of the administrative reforms, special attention has been given to transforming the system of civil service. In 2019, the Law "On Public civil service" was adopted, and from 2020 to 2024, measures were taken to ensure its full implementation.[5] Systems for merit-based recruitment, professional development, and performance evaluation have been gradually introduced. For instance, since 2022, a talent pool of managerial personnel has been established, and appointments to positions have begun to be made through open competition. International organizations have positively assessed progress in this area and have called on the government to continue implementing these reforms consistently. Overall, as a result of institutional reforms carried out between 2020 and 2024, the structure of public administration in Uzbekistan has been significantly modernized and streamlined. The

new system is contributing to bureaucratic simplification, faster decision-making, and stronger discipline in execution. International experts have positively evaluated the administrative restructuring implemented in Uzbekistan, recognizing it as one of the most dynamic modernization processes in the region. Uzbekistan's experience of administrative reforms during 2020-2024 has sparked considerable interest among neighboring countries in Central Asia-namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Although each of these states has implemented certain governance reforms since gaining independence, the scale and pace of recent changes in Uzbekistan stand out distinctly within the region.

RESULTS

Uzbekistan's experience in reducing the number of ministries and agencies is of interest to countries seeking to streamline their bureaucracies. Kazakhstan, for instance, has repeatedly revised its governmental structure since independence, including mergers and separations of ministries. In the 2020s, several ministries in Kazakhstan were also consolidated-for example, the Ministry of Information and Communications was abolished and its functions redistributed to other agencies. However, the state apparatus in Kazakhstan remains relatively large. According to some analysts, "duplicated functions and overlaps still persist." While President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's decision to reduce the Uzbek cabinet to 21 ministries has drawn attention in Kazakhstan, the two countries operate in different administrative contexts. Kazakhstan already maintains around 18-20 ministries, and its governance system is comparatively more centralized.[6] Current reforms in Kazakhstan are primarily focused on political power redistribution-such as the transition away from a "super-presidential" model-though downsizing the administrative apparatus remains on the agenda. Thus, Uzbekistan's approach to merging ministries and reducing staff could serve as a partial model for Kazakhstan. For instance, in 2024, proposals were discussed in Kazakhstan to eliminate certain agencies and transfer their powers to existing ministries.

In Kyrgyzstan, the government structure has historically been more compact than in Uzbekistan, with fewer ministries-a fact largely attributed to the country's smaller size and budgetary constraints. In recent years, major structural changes have taken place in

Kyrgyzstan's political system following successive political crises, including a shift from a parliamentary to a presidential form of governance. As a result, several ministries were restructured. After assuming power, President Sadyr Japarov launched an initiative in 2021 to reduce the number of ministries, for example, by merging the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Finance. In this regard, Uzbekistan's experience in optimizing institutional structure could be seen as partially "exported" to Kyrgyzstan. However, Kyrgyzstan faces a key challenge: frequent changes in government and persistent political instability hinder the continuity and consistency of reforms. In contrast, Uzbekistan's strong centralized leadership has enabled the implementation of bold structural changes with greater consistency. For Kyrgyzstan, the main obstacle to applying Uzbekistan's model lies in the issue of institutional stability-that is, the lack of sustained political will and resources necessary to fully implement adopted decisions.

From the perspectives of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, the likelihood of adopting Uzbekistan's experience in downsizing government structures appears relatively low. This is primarily due to the deeply centralized nature of governance in both countries, where personnel policy is heavily concentrated in the hands of the president and his close inner circle. In Tajikistan, reducing the number of ministries and agencies may conflict with the interests of the presidential elite, as many official positions function as tools for appointing loyal individuals and maintaining rent-seeking networks. In Turkmenistan, although the formal structure of the state is not particularly large, the system remains highly centralized in practice, operating under a "super-presidential" model. Consequently, Uzbekistan's streamlining experience has yet to be emulated.[7] On the contrary, in Turkmenistan, a recurring pattern has been observed where each new president-such as Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and, since 2022, his son Serdar Berdimuhamedov-has created new ministries or committees to accommodate loyal personnel. Nevertheless, in the long run, economic necessity may eventually compel both governments to optimize their administrative apparatus. When that time comes, Uzbekistan's experience may serve as a practical reference. Uzbekistan's establishment of an independent anti-corruption agency, the practice of adopting annual state programs, and publishing open

reports have generated significant interest across Central Asia. Kazakhstan, in fact, was slightly ahead in this area, having established its own independent Anti-Corruption Agency back in 2015. Kazakhstan also adopts annual national anti-corruption programs and publishes performance ratings of government agencies. As a result, Kazakhstan ranks the highest in the region on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)-88th place in 2023. However, challenges persist in Kazakhstan as well, particularly high-level corruption and de facto impunity among elites. Upon assuming power in 2019, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev introduced several reforms, including laws banning senior officials from owning property abroad and requiring members of parliament to disclose their assets. Some of these reforms have not yet been implemented in Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, in 2023 Tokayev claimed that "corruption has been almost eradicated," though several serious scandals continued to surface. Thus, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have room to learn from each other: Uzbekistan could focus more on establishing accountability for senior officials, while Kazakhstan could benefit from adopting Uzbekistan's innovations in transparency indices and parliamentary oversight. For example, Kazakhstan has yet to introduce the practice of parliamentary hearings on annual anti-corruption reports-an innovation from Uzbekistan that may be of interest to its neighbor. Kyrgyzstan, for its part, has traditionally relied on relatively free media and an active civil society to fight corruption. However, its institutions remain weak. Kyrgyzstan has never had a standalone anti-corruption agency-instead, the State Committee for National Security included a corruption department, which was dissolved in 2021. Under President Sadyr Japarov, numerous former officials, including ex-presidents, were arrested on corruption charges. However, critics argue that these actions have become a tool for silencing dissent. Transparency International has criticized Kyrgyzstan as "a former island of democracy that has turned into a consolidated authoritarian regime, with the justice system targeting critics." In such an environment, introducing institutional innovations like Uzbekistan's independent agency or open asset declarations is difficult. Corruption is increasingly used as a weapon in political struggles. Nonetheless, Kyrgyz civil society may still look to Uzbekistan's experience in open data

and public participation. For example, in 2022, Kyrgyz activists launched an "Open Budget" portal-drawing attention to the Ministry of Finance of Uzbekistan's own Open Budget platform. In Tajikistan, anti-corruption measures tend to be more formalistic. Although an anti-corruption agency was established in the 2010s and has punished some lower-ranking officials, it has failed to address systemic corruption, which is deeply rooted in the upper levels of power. The president's family is tightly intertwined with major business interests. In this context, Uzbekistan's more substantive anti-corruption reforms are unlikely to be replicated in Tajikistan due to the lack of political will. Still, certain formal elements are being adopted: for instance, in 2020, Tajikistan passed a law on the declaration of income and assets by public officials-but enforcement remains weak. Similarly, in 2021, Tajikistan introduced harsher penalties for corruption under the UN Convention Against Corruption, but tangible results are lacking. In short, while the "on paper" mechanisms from Uzbekistan's model may be replicated in Tajikistan, a supportive environment similar to Uzbekistan's is necessary to make them functional. Turkmenistan, by contrast, rarely discusses corruption openly. The highly closed nature of Turkmen society makes independent assessments of corruption levels extremely difficult. However, international rankings consistently place Turkmenistan at the bottom of the CPI. The government maintains the official narrative that "there is no corruption," and therefore does not engage in public discourse on anti-corruption strategies. Still, practical needs may push Turkmenistan to adopt certain measures. For example, in 2019, the authorities imprisoned several high-ranking officials-including a provincial governor-on corruption charges, and publicized the convictions. These actions may have been partially inspired by anti-corruption campaigns in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan's administrative reforms have also included significant elements aimed at strengthening local governance-such as the implementation of the "district-based" (mahallabay) management model and the revision of regional governors' (hokims) powers. This direction represents a relatively new experience in Central Asia-exportable in theory, though politically complex in practice. Kazakhstan, for instance, has long appointed regional (oblast)

governors directly by the President, with those same governors also serving as chairs of local councils. In 2021, Kazakhstan launched an experimental process of electing district- and village-level akims, marking a first in the region. As part of his reforms to reduce “super-presidential” powers, President Tokayev stated in 2022: “Restricting the powers of governors and strengthening local councils not only prevents corruption, but also reduces excessive centralization of power.” This is conceptually similar to Uzbekistan’s move to separate regional hokims from chairing local councils. Thus, both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are pursuing parallel paths toward making local governance more autonomous. If successful, these experiments may lead both countries to eventually adopt more democratic measures such as the direct election of regional governors. Historically, Kyrgyzstan maintained relatively independent local governance-mayors of Bishkek and Osh, for example, were elected by local councils (although they are now appointed by the president), and heads of rural districts (aymaks) are elected directly by the population. However, under the 2021 constitutional reforms introduced by President Japarov, many powers were re-centralized, weakening the foundations of local self-government. In this regard, Kyrgyzstan is diverging from Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, should Kyrgyzstan return to a more democratic trajectory in the future, Uzbekistan’s experience-such as mechanisms for making hokims accountable to local councils or engaging citizens through neighborhood assemblies-could serve as a useful reference. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, by contrast, have not shown any intention of reforming local governance structures. In both countries, all levels of governors are appointed directly by the president, and local councils wield virtually no real power. Uzbekistan’s model of empowering local councils is currently not being considered in these states. In fact, Tajikistan’s 2021 legislation further concentrated power in the hands of local executives by granting them greater authority-such as recommending judges and prosecutors. In Turkmenistan, local elections exist only for formal purposes and have no meaningful impact on governance. Nonetheless, Uzbekistan’s reform efforts in local governance are being shared with regional neighbors through mechanisms of Central Asian cooperation-for example, in the context of the Organization of Turkic States or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Training programs and administrative seminars provide opportunities for Uzbekistan to showcase its local governance model. In this way, Uzbekistan strengthens its soft power in the region and may gradually encourage neighboring states to consider similar reforms. The “new governance model” envisioned by B. Katz represents a complex synthesis of authoritarian modernization, market reforms, digital government, and the renewal of public services.[8]

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that many elements of Uzbekistan’s administrative reform experience are of interest to other Central Asian countries and may, to some extent, be adapted. However, since each country’s political and social context-and reformist will-differs, the degree to which these reforms are adopted also varies.

Kazakhstan and, to a certain extent, Kyrgyzstan appear more inclined to learn from Uzbekistan’s experience, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have largely chosen to either adopt reforms superficially on paper or remain silent for now. Professors, scholars, and international analysts emphasize that when “exporting” any reform model, it must be tailored to the local context. As American analyst B. Katz notes, “A new governance model is emerging in Central Asia, but it must undergo a unique evolution in each state.”[9] International organizations such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the OSCE seem ready to promote Uzbekistan’s experience in the region, as these reforms contribute to regional stability and development. For example, the OSCE’s 2023 report on anti-corruption noted that “anti-corruption efforts are more effective when public participation is involved,” citing Uzbekistan’s civic engagement campaigns as a positive example.

CONCLUSION

Between 2020 and 2024, administrative reforms implemented in Uzbekistan elevated the country’s governance system to a qualitatively new level. These reforms streamlined the state apparatus, clarified the distribution of authority, transitioned public service delivery to digital and transparent mechanisms, launched an uncompromising fight against corruption, and institutionalized the principles of efficiency and accountability.

These transformations were driven by strong political will from the leadership and broad public support. As a result, the reforms have already begun to yield tangible outcomes-rising positions in international rankings, increased citizen

satisfaction, and improvements in economic indicators. Of course, numerous challenges remain ahead, including securing judicial independence, addressing high-level corruption, and ensuring the autonomy of local governments. Nonetheless, Uzbekistan's reform experience holds distinct significance in the Central Asian region. These reforms are increasingly recognized as a potential regional model. Some experts suggest that "Central Asia is searching for a new governance paradigm and Uzbekistan may be at the forefront of that transition." Countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are drawing inspiration from Uzbekistan's reforms to varying degrees: some are adopting specific elements (Kazakhstan-digital services; Kyrgyzstan-simplified management practices), while others are cautiously observing and gradually adapting selected reforms over time. Academic observers emphasize that while Uzbekistan's "new governance" model offers hope for the region, its every aspect cannot be universally applied; rather, it must be adjusted to local conditions and specific national needs. The international community-including the World Bank, the United Nations, and the OECD-not only positively evaluates Uzbekistan's reform efforts, but also expresses readiness to support the dissemination of this experience across the region. Improved governance efficiency and transparency are viewed as critical drivers of regional development and security. As noted in a UNDP report, Uzbekistan's reforms have "strengthened governance and institutions, enhanced transparency and accountability, and created a foundation for long-term sustainability." In summary, through its 2020-2024 administrative reforms, Uzbekistan has laid the cornerstone for the modern statehood of the "New Uzbekistan." While the reform process continues, its initial results and lessons have already become a valuable learning model for neighboring states. In the coming years, deeper implementation and wider regional adaptation of these reforms may elevate governance culture across Central Asia and help shape effective, transparent, and citizen-oriented states free from corruption.

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