



Crackdown on NGOs in Uzbekistan

*Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association
(Article 20, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)*

The independent local NGO sector in Uzbekistan is on the verge of being wiped out. According to OSI's sources in the country, as well as media reports, about 200 domestic NGOs were forcibly closed by authorities during August and September 2005.¹ The ongoing crackdown on independent NGOs in Uzbekistan raises the prospect of a situation in which only so-called GONGOs (government-organized/oriented NGOs) will remain in the country. The few surviving NGOs will be swallowed up and subjugated by the newly created national NGO Association, which held a public meeting on October 17, 2005. These moves, following the military's shooting of protesters in Andijan in May, highlight the government strategy of suppressing any potential for organized challenge to its policies. They also underline the need for a thoroughgoing re-examination of assistance strategies aimed at supporting the growth of civil society in Uzbekistan.

Background

This crackdown started at the end of 2003 when, in the wake of Georgia's Rose Revolution, the government took the following measures to bring NGO activity under its control:

- Ordering international donor organizations to seek approval from the Ministry of Justice for all events (conferences, seminars, workshops, etc.) that they sponsored.
- Requiring all international NGOs, previously accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to re-register with the Ministry of Justice.
- Mandating that all NGOs use one of only two permissible banks, and establishing a secret review committee empowered to block the transfer of

¹ IWPR, 01 October 2005; the Russian service of Deutsche Welle, 30 August 2005; *Eurasianet*, 4 October 2005.

grant funds from international donors. Less than 10-20 percent of grant transfers were approved from January to October 2005.

- Forcing NGOs to close because they were deemed “inactive” by the Ministry of Justice if they showed no banking activity due to the new restrictions.
- Creating, in June 2005, the government-controlled NGO Association to which any remaining NGOs must belong and a government fund to finance these NGOs, enabling even further avenues for state surveillance and control.

Current Situation

In August 2005, the authorities took decisive and direct measures to eliminate any and all NGOs, regardless of their loyalty to the regime or their missions. All NGOs, initially in the Ferghana valley but then across the country, were invited to local branches of the Ministry of Justice and requested to close down voluntarily or face legal action and more repressive measures. Most NGOs, understandably, preferred not to challenge this ultimatum, given their lack of faith in the impartiality and independence of the Uzbek judicial system. A few, refusing to be cowed, didn't submit the application for closure and are prepared to deal with the consequences.

According to independent sources, in August alone around 200 NGOs closed in this way. In August, Deputy Minister of Justice (Pulat) Samatov, personally responsible for the registration of NGOs, religious organizations, and political parties, said that out of “5,000 NGOs 175 were closed down voluntarily.”² In September, this process continued and different sources from various provinces reported the closing of almost all NGOs in the Ferghana Valley, with 70 NGOs, or two-thirds, closing in Karakalpakstan. Similar trends were observed in the rest of the country.

According to most conservative estimates, more than 60 percent of all active NGOs have been closed down during 2005 alone. This percentage would make the number of closures much higher than 175 out of 5,000. But the figure of 5,000 total NGOs is misleading. In the last two to three years, government officials have announced various totals of registered NGOs in the country: 3,500, 4,000, and 5,000. In September 2005, the Uzbek Parliament said there were 5,227 registered NGOs. Finally, at the October 17 meeting of the National NGO Association, the government announced a figure of 600 functioning NGOs.³

Even this number most likely obscures the real statistics and includes both GONGOs and public associations created in Soviet times. But the Ministry of Justice has never made public a full list of registered NGOs, and thus the NGO statistics are not transparent or verifiable. In fact, according to OSI estimates, even during the heyday of NGOs, during the peak of the U.S.-Uzbek partnership between 2002 and late 2003, the number of independent NGOs did not exceed 1,000.

Implications

² Deutsche Welle, 30 August 2005.

³ Fargana.Ru Information Agency, 18.10.2005.

According to some experts, the crackdown on NGOs coincided with the breaking down of the Uzbek-U.S. strategic partnership and strained relations with the West in general beginning in 2003 but gaining momentum after events in Andijan. IWPR cites a senior government civil servant in Uzbekistan, who did not want to be named, as saying: “The NGOs have grown into a major force, and the state has been alarmed about this since as long ago as 2003. It was then that they started working out careful plans to paralyse the NGOs’ activities. It had to be done in such a way that Uzbekistan didn’t look like a country that persecutes NGOs. To that end, a number of government orders were issued to place obstacles in the way of NGO activity.”⁴

After the bloody events in Andijan on May 12-14, when the military and police forces indiscriminately opened fire on largely unarmed protesters, the government has become especially determined to eliminate the whole independent nonprofit sector, regardless of the NGOs’ loyalty to the government and the political neutrality of their activities. This eradication of civil society has coincided with the isolation of the country from the international community.

Independent observers within the country believe that the crackdown on the NGO sector signals a new governance system fundamentally different from the one that existed prior to 2004 when there was room for civic activity and freedom of association. The new system will resemble a similar totalitarian project now taking place in Turkmenistan, where even innocuous forms of civic activity are met with suspicion and hostility by the authorities.

Recommendations

International institutions should take seriously the ongoing regressive measures in Uzbekistan, which undermine a decade of efforts to strengthen civil society by domestic reformers and international organizations alike.

- All efforts should be made to continue to provide Uzbekistan’s few remaining independent NGOs, both registered and unregistered, with financial and political support.
- Bilateral and multilateral partners should protest efforts to close down, halt or penalize the activities of their NGO partners.
- Uzbekistan’s international partners should make clear to the government that while they may cooperate with GONGOs for program purposes, they do not consider them a substitute for autonomous, uncontrolled civil society entities.
- International financial institutions should warn Uzbek government banks and ministries of finance and trade that suspending NGO access to funds constitutes serious political interference in the banking sector and thus reflects negatively on the status of market reforms and freedoms that the government professes to support.

⁴ IWPR, 1 October 2005.