



GONGOs in Uzbekistan: Eradicating Independent NGOs

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

The ongoing crackdown on independent NGOs in Uzbekistan raises the prospect that the only remaining nongovernmental entities will be GONGOs (government-organized NGOs). The few surviving NGOs will be subjugated by the newly created national NGO Association, which announced on October 17, 2005, that it included 150 out of the country's 600 NGOs.¹ The association and other new government-created and -controlled entities aim to place themselves at the forefront of public life, block the activities of genuine NGOs, and usurp cooperation with international organizations.

GONGOs as state agents

To give some historical context, the government-organized public associations in the Soviet past played an essential role within the state-corporative system. The core institutions of the central government and Communist party were surrounded by a ring of state-controlled corporations, including public associations.

A similar pattern is being followed in post-independence Uzbekistan, suggesting that GONGOs, both *de jure* and *de facto*, cannot be regarded as civil society organizations, but rather as structural extensions of the government dressed up with

¹ Ferghana.Ru Information Agency, 18.10.2005. In the past, the government had maintained that there were up to 5,000 NGOs in the country; this statistic is therefore a telling revelation both about previous exaggeration and on the extent of recent government-forced NGO closures.

some NGO characteristics. The table below demonstrates several fundamental distinctions between GONGOs and independent NGOs:

GONGOs	Independent NGOs
As a rule are initiated by state officials and created according to government resolutions	Initiated by citizens - individuals or groups of individuals
Enjoy exclusive material and institutional benefits and rights awarded by the state	Don't enjoy any particular benefits and rights from the government, except those stipulated by law for all NGOs
Work toward maintaining the state's ideological and political control over society and implementing state policies	Work toward goals established by founders themselves and sometimes, as grantees of international organizations, suggested by grant providers

There are a great variety of GONGOs in Uzbekistan, some carried over from the Soviet Union, (for instance, professional associations, trade unions, youth and health care organizations), and others created since independence by the central government. These include the Soghlom Avlod Uchun (For a Healthy Generation) Fund, which provides mother and child health care; the Mahalla Fund, which works with neighborhood communities; and the Center Manaviyat va Marifat (Spirituality and Enlightenment), which addresses issues of public morality and education.

Most of these organizations were created by presidential decrees and are supported from the state budget. Besides direct cash transfers, most also receive office space, cars, telephone services, exemption from all taxes for several years and from custom duties, free public transportation (Soglom Avlod Uchun), obligatory donations from business (Kamolot), and access to hard currency convertibility at favorable rates (Soglom Avlod Uchun).

Some GONGOs (for instance, the International Cultural Centre) possess a status similar to that of a small-sized ministry dealing with various aspects of social life. It is not surprising that people perceive them as representatives of the state. They enjoy close links with the state apparatus at the central and local level, first of all because their leaders are drawn from former state officials. This cadre policy resembles the Soviet style *nomenklatura* system, in which personal backgrounds are checked, previously by the Communist party and KGB and now probably by the National Security Service (NSS). GONGO leaders in Uzbekistan can only be appointed if they are included in the *nomenklatura* database or if they are recommended by the president's office. Thanks to their personal ties with the state apparatus, GONGO leaders often claim to be mediators between international donors and the government. Sometimes they succeed in fulfilling this function, especially when international donor organizations need to establish contacts with state institutions and officials.

In most cases, these GONGOs operate in ways that seek to emulate public activism. There have been exceptions, including examples of GONGO leaders who have acquired reputations as "liberal" and open to innovative ideas. However, the openness of these comparatively "liberal" GONGO leaders is limited by their mandate. GONGOs are charged not with minimizing the state (since in fact they are part of it)

but with facilitating the state's ideological and political control over society. As one GONGO leader said, "We have to secure the state as the only master in the country."²

In order to re-assert this control, Uzbekistan's government has created a series of new GONGOs addressing the most critical and "hot" spheres of civil society development—mass media, the Internet, and coordination of the nonprofit sector itself. In many cases, these new organizations engage in a kind of deceptive mimicry, outwardly adapting their missions and names to previously established nongovernmental structures. The new GONGOs include the following:

- *The National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI)*, created in December 2003. NAESMI unites regional and private TV stations in response to the activity of Internews (a U.S.-based international NGO), which had established a partnership network with private TV stations across the country.³
- *Uzinfo.com*, also created in 2003 by the same national Agency for Information and Telecommunication. Uzinfo.com's mission has been to attract foreign funds for information technology projects.
- *The Institute for the Study of Civil Society*, created in 2003 under the auspices of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies reporting to the presidential apparatus. From the beginning, this organization established itself as a facilitator of various initiatives and campaigns in the fields of civil and political society as well as media and elections, including the creation of the Liberal-Democratic Party, set up as a new ruling pro-presidential party.
- *The National Association of NGOs*, created in response to a similar association initiated by an October 2004 NGO forum sponsored by the Eurasia Foundation (a U.S.-based NGO) and other international donors. During 2005, a working group elected at the October forum prepared to legalize their association. But the government sought to neutralize this initiative by stealing the idea and "brand." The work of the independent association was blocked and the government-controlled association was founded on May 18, 2005, with all NGOs in the country invited to join.

The last of these entities, the National Association of NGOs, is a particularly stark example of the government-controlled nature of GONGOs. The NGO representatives called by the government to attend its founding meeting elected one of their number as the group's chair, but this person was forced out shortly afterwards and a government appointee put in her place. The new chair, Nazim Habibullayev, director of the Timurid Museum, has virtually no experience in working with NGOs. Shortly after that, on June 23, 2005, a presidential decree conferred upon the association various benefits, including rent-free office space and tax benefits, and encouraged a number of ministers and wealthy state and nonstate organizations and enterprises to provide financial assistance to the association.⁴

² Interview with Svetlana Inamova, Head of the Women Committee, February 2004.

³ NAESMI's close links to the state are further shown by the fact that it controls 20% of shares in the company 'Uzbekistan Cable Systems', the only authorized entity to license cable TV stations (Source: Ferghana.ru Information Agency, 31.05.2005).

⁴ Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, No: IIII-107, of 23 June 2005, 'On Measures of Assistance to the Institutions of Civil Society in Uzbekistan'.

This new generation of GONGOs, including NAESMI, the Institute for the Study of Civil Society, and the NGO Association, act more aggressively than their predecessors in trying to establish themselves at the forefront of public life in Uzbekistan. They are also open for cooperation with international donors, though the agenda of such cooperation is controlled by the state. Their openness can be characterised as a readiness to accept money but not ideas.

Implications for international donor organizations

Some international donors enter into cooperation with GONGOs on the conditions suggested by the government (“yes” for money, “no” for ideas) for the following four reasons:

1. Although none of the international organizations with a field office in the country genuinely confuse GONGOs with independent NGOs, some international donors still consider it worthwhile to engage with GONGOs, not always understanding the exact nature of their relationship to the government.
2. Some international donors hope that engagement with the state and state-controlled institutions might help them in promoting reforms by means of persuasion and dialogue. The assumption behind such an approach is that the government’s reluctance to follow reforms is a lack of awareness, and that if one is able to make the case for reform using clear arguments then the obstacles for reforms will be removed.
3. Cooperation with GONGOs is seen as a coping strategy, a necessary price for continuing its presence in the country.
4. Some international donors believe that in working with GONGOs they will get things done more smoothly and quickly than they would have working with real NGOs as their primary partners. This is especially true with the government-controlled Center for Human Rights, whose director, Akmal Saidov, also occupies the important position of head of the parliamentary committee on democratization and NGOs.

Not all international organizations present in the country follow such a pragmatic policy toward GONGOs. Some are aware of the danger that their support for GONGOs will assist the state in its mission of subsuming all independent civil society under its own control, and of squeezing out real NGOs from public life.

It is possible that some international organizations confuse Uzbek GONGOs with equivalent Western institutions that also enjoy close relations with governments. In the West, however, such NGOs implement programs ordered by national governments paid from the state budget, while still maintaining independent control and governance of their mission and priorities.

The phenomenon of GONGOs in Uzbekistan is qualitatively different from this practice. First of all, GONGOs in Uzbekistan are dependent on the government from their very establishment. The practice of allocating governmental funds on a fair and competitive basis has not been established in the country, a situation that undermines the idea of a social partnership in which the government delegates some functions of the state to society. In fact, the delegation of functions takes place, but within the boundaries defined by the state.

Recommendations

International organizations have to be fully aware of the Uzbek context and the nature of the distinction between GONGOs and independent NGOs. The institutional differences are becoming even more acute as the government closes down almost all independent NGOs and subjugates the few remaining ones to GONGO direction. One also has to be aware that the government of Uzbekistan will want international donors to only fund those GONGOs and their associates.

Uzbekistan's multilateral and bilateral partners should recognize that fostering genuine civil society is an important end in itself, which goes beyond any program-related goals they wish to achieve with their assistance.

Some international donor organizations will still consciously choose to partner with GONGOs, counting on the prospects for influencing the state and society. In these cases, they need to be informed that, regardless of the balance of pluses and minuses of such cooperation, they are helping to nurture the state-corporative system that has been a key pillar of the authoritarian regime.

Selective cooperation with selected GONGOs could be justified, but only under the following conditions:

- When such cooperation serves to promote the agenda of reform or creation of a constituency for reform and helps to reach out to both policymakers and the public with clear calls to both to pursue reform.
- If cooperation is the price for keeping other, reformist agenda-related programs open.
- When the beneficiary organization is run by a progressive leader, or when its mission is sufficiently technical and does not include establishing political control over existing nongovernmental structures. However, such examples are the exception rather than the rule.
- If the donor pursues a concurrent strategy of support, both political and financial, for genuine NGOs in the same sector.

Most of all, international donors should be cautious in dealing with the new generation of GONGOs whose primary mission is to provide public relations for the state and promote a policy of strict control over civil society and the media.

It must be recognized that contracting with GONGOs in any case will be at the expense of supporting really independent civil society groups and institutions. International organizations should carefully weigh up all pros and cons before embracing GONGOs as their local partners.