In April 2020, a decree was issued on the establishment of the Public Chamber under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The activity of the chamber is to establish a dialogue between the state, citizens, and civil society institutions. Political scientist Sanjar Saidov shared some views on the creation and future work of this chamber, in an article for CABAR.asia.

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It is known that Shavkat Mirziyoyev in his address to the Oliy Majlis at the beginning of this year, had put forward a number of proposals for the development of civil society. In particular, in order to strengthen public control and establish closer interaction between the state and society, he proposed creating the Public Chamber of the Republic of Uzbekistan.[1]
Based on this, on April 16, 2020, a Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On the establishment of a Public Chamber under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan” was issued. The decree defines the main activities of the Public Chamber, as the establishment of a modern form of systemic and effective dialogue, combining the efforts of the state, citizens and civil society institutions aimed at further accelerated and comprehensive development of the country. As well as ensuring the coherence of their social interests, assistance in enhancing the participation of citizens in the affairs of the state and society, as well as in introducing modern mechanisms of public-private partnership.\[21\]

The Public Chamber was also given functions to use the mechanisms of “public hearing”, “public examination”, “public monitoring”, and the preparation of the annual national report on the state of civil society in Uzbekistan.

While looking at foreign experience, one can find out that in some countries of the world there are similar advisory bodies. For example, in France - the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), which advises the parliament and the government on the development of socio-political processes. In Russia, the Public Chamber was created to implement the interaction of citizens with state authorities and local governments in order to take into account the needs and interests of citizens, protect their rights and freedoms in the formation and implementation of state policy. Finland has a Civil Society Policy Advisory Council, which is performing many tasks that are directed towards developing democracy and civil society. In Germany, there is an Anket-Commission under parliament dealing with issues of civic engagement in the life of the state and society, which is a key element of civil society. In 2019, the National Council of Public Confidence was created in Kazakhstan, which included representatives of various political parties and public associations, non-governmental organizations, the mass media, human rights defenders, and leading experts.

The program tasks of the Public Chamber created in Uzbekistan are analogous to the functions of similar structures in foreign countries. Moreover, based on the laws of development of public life in Uzbekistan, as well as considering international experience, the following aspects are identified as priority areas of its activity:

1. Establishing a modern form of systemic and effective dialogue between government bodies, citizens, and civil institutions. Such interaction is aimed at further acceleration and comprehensive development of the country, and coordination of the social interests of the designated structures.
2. Assistance in establishing practical and effective cooperation of civil society
institutions in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this context, it should be noted that today there is an understanding in the world that one of the most important characteristics of civil society is the development of the institution of social partnership, which is designed to help harmonize the interests of people, society and the state, as well as their harmonious, focused and sustainable development. However, there is no complete analysis and answer to the questions: what exactly did the implementation of social partnership projects for the development of society and the state as a whole give and what is the contribution of NGOs to the socio-economic development of society in achieving the SDGs?

3. **Promoting a radical improvement in the quality of standard-setting activities, conducting a public examination of draft normative legal acts** on the most pressing issues of the country’s socio-economic life and causing particular interest to the public, improving them on the basis of consultations and public hearings. In order to achieve this goal, in particular, a procedure is being established according to which proposals for corrective actions and amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, draft normative legal acts on the most pressing issues of the country’s socio-economic life and of particular interest to the public are sent to the Public Chamber.

4. **Formation of an effective system of public control.** As international practice testifies, **public control is an integral and most important attribute of civil society**, a necessary condition for achieving the supremacy of the Constitution and laws. This contributes to the effective functioning of the state, increases the responsibility of state power, ensures the operation of laws, respect for human rights and freedoms. The state, using feedback from society, takes the constructive proposals of citizens as a basis and implements the necessary reforms based on their trust and support. This is important in the creation and development of a competitive economy, the growth of living standards, and the formation of a fair civil society.

In addition, the “*Mening fikrim*” web portal is transferred to the Public Chamber, where citizens can submit proposals in the form of an electronic collective appeal on topical issues related to the life of society and the state. Similar norms are enshrined in the Constitution of France, legislative acts of Armenia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Russia, Finland, and other countries. They are considered as a kind of implementation of the **“people’s legislative initiative”** – the most important element of the public control institution.[3]

*In general, evaluating positively the creation of the Public Chamber, it would be great to analyze the functioning of the Chamber in the context of the development of civil society.*
Some features of civil society in Uzbekistan

From the first years of independence, Uzbekistan announced democratic reforms and the construction of civil society. It can be said that in some sense, the legal and institutional foundations of civil society have been created. Today, the country has adopted more than 200 regulatory documents relating to civil society. In various areas of public life there are more than nine thousand non-governmental non-profit organizations.

Based on the fundamental concepts of the political sciences, it should be noted that civil society consists of a system of social ties that are not directly regulated or controlled by the state, such as free citizens, public organizations, and voluntary associations. Civil society forms its communications on the basis of laws that differ from the principles of public administration.

The Uzbek model of building a civil society is based on the fact that the state acts as the main “reformer”, and also has a paternalistic character. It is the state (power) that determines the level of social activity in society and through “reliable” NGOs transforms it into a socially oriented movement. The creation of the Public Chamber is also a reflection of such a worldview.

On the other hand, a true civil society should arise from below (from society itself) and spontaneously. Perhaps this is the main reason why the country cannot form a civil society for almost thirty years?

Today it is difficult to get a satisfactory answer to the question of how many of the existing public associations in Uzbekistan perform their social functions. Most large NGOs are engaged in fulfilling government orders. Some even forgot that they are public organizations. This situation led to the formation of the GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization) team in the country. Such a practice of executing state orders by NGOs exist in developed democracies. However, there is a “golden rule” that applies in such activities, according to which the principle of equality is not violated, that is, the state does not interfere in the independence and position of the public organization.

Against this background, one detail attracts attention. According to the decree, members of the Public Chamber will consist of a total of 50 people. Of these, 18 are appointed by the president, 14 members are chairmen of regional public chambers, and only the remaining 18 members are elected from among representatives of various public organizations. In this
process, an important element of civil society and democracy – the selective principle – was not considered. In my opinion, all members of the Public Chamber should be elected from among representatives of various NGOs, public associations, independent mass media, and academic circles.

**Lack of perception of the problem**

The adoption of the decree “On the establishment of the Public Chamber under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan” indicates the absence of a clear national strategy for the formation and development of civil society in Uzbekistan.

For example, duplicate and sometimes contradictory legal documents have been adopted regarding the construction of civil society over the past three years. For example, a resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. “On additional measures to improve the activities of an independent institute for monitoring the formation of civil society” (March 27, 2017), decrees “On measures to radically increase the role of civil society institutions in the process of democratic renewal of a country” (May 4, 2018), “On measures to support the activities of the center for the development of civil society” (October 30, 2019), etc.

In accordance with these legal documents, the Advisory Council on the Development of Civil Society under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which existed for less than two years, and the Center for the Development of Civil Society, which existed for less than six months, were created. According to the latest decree, these institutions are abolished.

That is, all this shows that the country’s political elite still has no answer to the question of how civil society should be built in Uzbekistan ...

In addition, there are currently no think tanks in the country that would study in depth the construction of civil society and the trends of social development. The time has come to form such research centers and scientific schools, capable of developing basic indicators for the development of democracy and civil society in Uzbekistan.

There are various indexes of democracy and civil society in the world like the “CIVICUS Civil Society Index”, “Varieties of Democracy”, “Bertelsmann Transformation Index”, “Freedom House: NGO Sustainability Index” and they are measured according to different methodologies and designs. These indicators are considered, and government decisions are correlated with them throughout the country. So far, Uzbekistan is not included in these international indices and ratings or remains “not in the best” position in global ratings.
It is the Public Chamber that should become a national body that constantly studies and analyzes civil society, democratic renewal, and the rule of law in the country while developing national indicators of social development.

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**Non-profit NGO as a “social shock absorber”**

Today, when the coronavirus pandemic is spreading in the country and socio-economic crisis phenomena are beginning, non-profit NGOs should act as a “social shock absorber” in society. “Social shock absorber” – these are institutions capable of receiving signals about the development of sociocultural contradictions and taking measures to overcome them, stimulating the ability of society to follow the sociocultural law.[6]

It is the “social shock absorber” that fixes the growth of latent or overt discontent, the growth of mass discomfort, and updates the programs of relevant measures. In a liberal society, such social shock absorbers are free mass media, political parties and various non-governmental non-profit organizations.

The absence of appropriate social shock absorbers leads to a phenomenon that can be called “deep-moving disease.” Based on this, one may ask: **how far do non-profit NGOs in Uzbekistan fulfill the tasks of a “social shock absorber” in society today?**

The Public Chamber should become a kind of “bridge” between society and the state, supporting various non-governmental commercial organizations and other civil society institutions (social shock absorbers), and also increase civic activity in the country.

This process is primarily associated with civic activism and the volunteer movement. In Uzbekistan, volunteer activities are carried out in such areas as support for low-income, unemployed, large families, people in need of social rehabilitation, as well as care for patients, persons with disabilities, single, elderly and people who, due to their physical, material or other characteristics, need support and assistance.[7]

According to official data, today about five million citizens of Uzbekistan participate in the activities of various public organizations in one form or another. For example, members of the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan – 252 thousand; People’s Democratic Party – 425 thousand; Democratic Party Milliy Tiklanish – 190 thousand; Social Democratic Party “Adolat” – 135 thousand; The Ecological Party of Uzbekistan – 80 thousand people.
In this context, it is precisely the principle of “social shock absorber” that should ensure the social independence of individuals and, at the same time, by combining them into civil society institutions, strengthen social integration. It should be noted that the indicator of the mature level of civil society is *not the number of public organizations or official membership in them, but the level of citizen involvement in these organizations, that is, the social base of civil society that determines socio-political stability in the country*.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

The effective work of the Public Chamber acts as a synergistic effect on the development of sectors: for the *public sector*, this will allow the development and implementation of policies that will enhance the legitimacy of the state system. The *public organizations* are provided with an opportunity for organizational development, the acquisition of additional resources, the formation of lobbying skills, strengthening the status of NGOs in society. This platform helps the *business sector* improve its brand, build positive relationships in local markets, and enhance public-private partnerships.

Based on this, a number of conclusions can be made:

1. The Public Chamber should be truly independent and serve as a kind of “mirror” for the activities of the work carried out by the government and state bodies. For the implementation of this public control, all its members must be elected, not appointed.
2. In the future, the socio-political significance of the Public Chamber for the state and society will inevitably grow. Its ultimate task should be the prevention of dangerous clashes between the state and society in the context of current and upcoming crisis phenomena.
3. Members of the advisory body / dialogue platform should be able to freely propose an agenda for consultations, as well as attract other participants in public and political life so that the public knows about the problems and initiatives of civil society institutions and its contribution to solving public policy issues;
4. It is necessary to ensure maximum openness and transparency in the activities of the Public Chamber. It should be responsible not only to the president, but also to parliament. It is necessary to instill the skills of pluralism, free thinking, and professionalism in the activities of the Chamber. Unlike the previous Advisory Board, the Public Chamber needs to be developed in terms of the interests of civil society.

In conclusion, it should be noted that introducing ideas and notions about the importance of developing civil society and the need for democratic values to the population requires constant, difficult work. The problem of building a civil society in Uzbekistan will not lose its
relevance in the future and requires more extensive theoretical and empirical research, and the application of scientific results in social life. In this case, only society should play a decisive role.

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[1] Message from the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev Oliy Majlis. 01/25/2020


[5] The table is compiled on the basis of the data of the State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan: https://stat.uz


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