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THE ROLE OF THE MAHALLA INSTITUTION IN THE SOCIAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM OF SOUTHERN UZBEKISTAN DURING THE YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Ixtiyor G‘aniyevich Jalilov
Acting Professor, Department of History Information Technologies and Management University

Abstract. This article examines the role and significance of the mahalla institution in the social governance system of Southern Uzbekistan, particularly in the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions during the years of independence. The study is based on archival documents, legal and regulatory sources, statistical data, and reports on the activities of citizens' self-government bodies. The article analyzes the formation of the mahalla institution as a self-governing body of citizens from the early years of independence and highlights the gradual expansion of its powers and functions. Particular attention is paid to the role of mahallas in providing social protection to the population, working with youth and women, promoting employment, and contributing to the development of civil society. The findings demonstrate that the mahalla institution has become an effective intermediary between the state and society, playing a significant role in the socio-economic development of local communities. The research also reveals the transformation of the mahalla from a traditional community structure into an important component of the modern governance system. The materials and conclusions presented in the article serve as a valuable scientific source for studying the contemporary development trends of the mahalla institution in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Mahalla institution, social governance, citizens' self-government, Southern Uzbekistan, Kashkadarya region, Surkhandarya region, civil society, social protection, citizens' assembly of the mahalla, years of independence.

INTRODUCTION. Following the attainment of independence by Uzbekistan, the development of citizens' self-governing bodies became one of the priority directions of state policy. In particular, in the regions of Southern Uzbekistan, where strong traditions of collective governance had historically evolved, the *mahalla* institution developed into an important component of social governance. Today, citizens' assemblies of mahallas perform significant functions in providing social protection, working with youth and women, ensuring employment, and promoting the development of civil society. According to statistical data, as of 2025, more than 9,000 mahallas operate in Uzbekistan. Of these, over 800 are located in Kashkadarya Region and nearly 700 in Surkhandarya Region. Population growth in these regions has further increased the importance of the mahalla institution. In particular, by 2025 the population of Kashkadarya Region exceeded 3.6 million, while that of Surkhandarya Region surpassed 3 million. This situation necessitates strengthening the role of mahallas in social governance and public oversight [1]. This article analyzes the role of the mahalla institution in the social governance system of Southern Uzbekistan during the years of independence, its stages of development, and regional characteristics based on historical, legal, and statistical sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW. The formation and development of the mahalla institution have been widely studied by Uzbek historians, political scientists, and legal scholars during the years of independence. In particular, the scholarly works of A. Azizkhojayev, M. Qirgizboyev, A. Saidov, R. Ubaydullayeva, and S. Otamuratov have examined the role of the mahalla institution in the development of civil society, its legal foundations, and its social functions. These studies emphasize that the mahalla, as a self-governing body of citizens, serves as an important intermediary institution between the state and society [2].

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Among foreign scholars, the studies of P. Sievers, M. Liu, and K. Collins have analyzed the distinctive features of the mahalla institution in Uzbekistan and its role in local governance and social control. Their research evaluates the mahalla as a unique social institution characteristic of Eastern societies.

Furthermore, documents preserved in the funds of the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the state archives of Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya Regions constitute important sources for studying the historical development of mahalla activities. However, existing literature has not comprehensively examined the role, regional characteristics, and developmental dynamics of mahallas in Southern Uzbekistan within the social governance system during 1991–2026. The scientific significance of this article lies in its attempt to fill this research gap.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS. During the years of independence, the development of civil society institutions was identified as one of the priority directions of state policy in Uzbekistan. In this process, the mahalla institution functioned as a unique socio-legal bridge between society and the state. The development of the mahalla institution in the regions of Southern Uzbekistan—particularly Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya—displayed certain distinctive characteristics compared to other parts of the country. These differences were influenced by demographic conditions, historical development, national traditions, and high population density in the regions [3].

The study analyzed materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the state archives of Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya Regions, reports of citizens' assemblies, statistical agency data, and normative-legal documents. Based on these sources, it was determined that the role and significance of the mahalla institution in the social governance system of Southern Uzbekistan steadily increased throughout the years of independence [4].

The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Citizens' Self-Government Bodies," adopted on September 2, 1993, played a crucial role in strengthening the legal status of the mahalla institution. Under this law, citizens' assemblies of mahallas were established as subjects of public self-governance operating independently from state authorities. According to archival documents, by the mid-1990s more than 650 mahallas were functioning in Kashkadarya Region and nearly 580 in Surkhandarya Region. In subsequent years, the number of mahallas increased steadily due to population growth and the establishment of new settlements.

Statistical data indicate that while the population of Kashkadarya Region amounted to 1.8 million in 1991, it exceeded 3.6 million by 2025. Similarly, the population of Surkhandarya Region grew from 1.5 million to nearly 3 million during the same period. Demographic growth led to the establishment of new residential areas and mahallas, thereby expanding the territorial coverage of the mahalla system. The findings demonstrate a direct relationship between population growth and the development of the mahalla institution [5].

Analysis of archival materials shows that during the initial years of independence, mahallas primarily focused on social support for citizens, regulation of community ceremonies, and public oversight. However, beginning in the 2000s, the functions of the mahalla institution expanded significantly. Mahallas evolved into important social institutions engaged in employment promotion, identification of low-income families, resolution of family disputes, youth education, and women's issues.

The analysis reveals that one of the principal areas of activity of mahallas in Southern Uzbekistan was the implementation of social protection measures. In particular, since the 2010s, the participation of mahallas in identifying needy families and providing them with material assistance has intensified. The targeted distribution of social benefits and financial aid through mahallas increased the effectiveness of support provided to socially vulnerable groups of the population [6].

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Since 2020, the introduction of the "Iron Notebook" (*Temir Daftar*), "Women's Notebook" (*Ayollar Daftari*), and "Youth Notebook" (*Yoshlar Daftari*) systems has elevated the role of the mahalla institution in social governance to a new level. According to statistical data, hundreds of thousands of citizens in Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya Regions were included in social support programs through these mechanisms. Consequently, citizens' assemblies of mahallas became the lowest, yet one of the most effective, levels of governance for identifying and resolving the problems of the population.

The activities of the mahalla institution in working with youth are also of particular importance. Research findings indicate that the high proportion of young people in Southern Uzbekistan has imposed additional responsibilities on mahallas. Extensive efforts have been undertaken to provide vocational guidance, involve youth in sports and cultural activities, and prevent delinquency and crime. Archival documents record that during 2021–2025, thousands of young people were enrolled in entrepreneurship and vocational training programs through the initiatives of mahallas [7].

The role of mahallas in addressing women's issues also increased significantly. The establishment of the activities of women's activists within mahallas contributed to the development of effective mechanisms for resolving family-related problems, promoting women's employment, and encouraging their participation in entrepreneurial activities. Statistical data indicate that mahallas served as the primary organizing bodies in projects aimed at ensuring women's employment [8].

The study also examined the activities of mahallas in community improvement and infrastructure development. According to archival materials, hundreds of community work initiatives (*hashars*), beautification campaigns, and greening projects have been organized annually at the initiative of mahallas. Particularly in rural areas, mahallas played a leading role in repairing internal roads, improving drinking water supply networks, and facilitating the construction of social infrastructure facilities [9].

The role of the mahalla institution in the development of civil society was also identified as one of the significant findings of the study. The analysis demonstrates that citizens' assemblies of mahallas serve as an important mechanism for ensuring public participation in governance. The regular organization of citizens' meetings, public hearings, and various social events within mahallas has contributed to increasing civic engagement and social activity among the population.

In recent years, the introduction of digital technologies into the mahalla system has further enhanced its effectiveness. Through electronic databases, online monitoring tools, and digital reporting systems, the process of handling citizens' appeals has been simplified. This demonstrates that mahallas are evolving into modern institutions of social governance.

Based on the findings of the study, several conclusions can be drawn. First, during the years of independence, the mahalla institution in Southern Uzbekistan transformed from a traditional form of community governance into a modern institution of civil society. Second, mahallas became the principal mechanism for implementing social protection, working with youth and women, promoting employment, and exercising public oversight. Third, demographic growth and urbanization significantly influenced the territorial expansion of the mahalla system. Fourth, digitalization processes improved the administrative efficiency of mahallas and enhanced the quality of services provided to citizens [10].

Thus, during the years of independence, the mahalla institution became one of the most important components of the social governance system in Southern Uzbekistan. Its activities have gained significance not only in addressing local issues but also in promoting civil society development, ensuring social stability, and implementing state policies at the grassroots level.

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CONCLUSION. The results of the study demonstrate that the role and significance of the mahalla institution in the social governance system of Southern Uzbekistan increased substantially during the years of independence. Using the examples of Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya Regions, it was established that mahallas have evolved into important institutions responsible for social protection, employment promotion, youth and women's affairs, and public oversight as citizens' self-governing bodies. Archival documents and statistical data confirm that the territorial development of the mahalla system has been closely linked to population growth and ongoing social reforms. Consequently, the study provides scientific evidence that the mahalla institution has emerged as an effective mechanism for fostering civil society development and ensuring social stability.

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