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COMBATING CORRUPTION IN UZBEKISTAN: LEGAL REFORMS, INSTITUTIONAL PROGRESS, AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

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Abstract. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the development of anti-corruption policies in Uzbekistan. A significant shift occurred under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's leadership, with the introduction of comprehensive reforms. These included the establishment of a dedicated Anti-Corruption Agency and numerous presidential decrees aimed at preventing corruption risks, enhancing public oversight, and ensuring merit-based public service appointments. In this context, the 2022 Development Strategy reinforced a strict zero-tolerance policy toward corruption, emphasizing institutional accountability. However, significant obstacles continue to impede progress to some extent. Over a four-year period, more than 9,500 corruption offenses were recorded, causing substantial financial damage. Corruption remains entrenched due to legislative gaps and inadequate enforcement. Furthermore, the author concludes that corruption should be understood as a deeply rooted socio-economic and ethical challenge. To prevent and eradicate corruption, integrated reforms, rigorous oversight, risk assessment, civic engagement, and adherence to ethical standards are essential.

Keywords: legislative attention, preventive systems, international guidelines, global legal standards, academic perspectives, legal precision

Introduction

Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan has run into the persistent and multifaceted problem of corruption, which for a long time lacked sufficient institutional and legislative attention. Initial efforts to address corruption were largely symbolic, focusing more on joining international conventions than on establishing effective internal

controls or preventive systems. A turning point emerged with the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, under whose administration more structured and proactive approaches to anti-corruption reform were brought in. Key developments included the enactment of the 2017 Law "On Combating Corruption" and a series of presidential decrees that initiated preventive frameworks, enhanced

transparency, and reinforced institutional accountability on the whole.

Nevertheless, corruption continues to be a widespread issue across many sectors in Uzbekistan, as highlighted by frequent violations and the country's relatively low ranking on international corruption indices. This ongoing challenge has led to growing demands for deeper legal reforms, stronger law enforcement practices, and a broader societal shift towards ethical governance and integrity. Both international guidelines and academic research underline that corruption is not merely a legal issue, but also involves economic, moral, and psychological dimensions. Therefore, this paper explores the evolution of Uzbekistan's anti-corruption policies, evaluates the effectiveness of recent reforms, and proposes integrated legal and institutional solutions. Central to this analysis are the principles of prevention, legal precision, and the ethical responsibility of public officials.

Materials and methods

This study makes use of a qualitative approach centered on the in-depth examination of legal frameworks, presidential directives, policy initiatives, and international agreements that pertain to Uzbekistan's anti-corruption strategies. Analyzed core materials account for domestic legal acts compiled with significant presidential decrees.

Moreover, global legal standards, including the United Nations Convention against Corruption and the OECD's Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, are reviewed to evaluate Uzbekistan's compliance with international norms [1]. The research, in turn, integrates academic perspectives on the definition of corruption, drawing from both Western and national scholarly literature to construct a theoretical framework.

Research results

This paper examines Uzbekistan's evolving strategy for combating corruption, which has undergone significant transformation since President Shavkat

Mirziyoyev assumed power. The study analyzes several presidential decrees and the country's efforts, which were initially largely symbolic, focusing on joining international conventions without establishing practical mechanisms or adopting best practices from low-corruption countries. It highlights profound reforms aimed at strengthening transparency, introducing corruption risk assessment tools, and promoting broader public engagement in anti-corruption initiatives.

The paper also emphasizes that corruption is increasingly recognized not only as bribery but as a deeply rooted socio-economic and ethical issue. Furthermore, it underscores that sustainable progress requires aligning domestic laws with global standards, strengthening oversight, ensuring ethical conduct in governance, and engaging civil society to proactively curb the influence of corruption-related crimes.

Analysis of the research results

From the earliest days of independence, insufficient attention was paid to combating corruption and its ramifications in Uzbekistan. Consequently, the country primarily focused on joining several international treaties without establishing effective systemic mechanisms to prevent corruption or adopting best practices from countries with low corruption rates. Furthermore, the necessary approaches to legally regulate anti-corruption activities were not implemented. Over time, the Republic of Uzbekistan acceded to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (New York, October 31, 2003) through Law No. 158, dated July 7, 2008. Additionally, in 2010, Uzbekistan became a member of the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Following Shavkat Mirziyoyev's election as President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, a new era in anti-corruption efforts began, marked by the adoption of several laws and

normative-legal acts aimed at combating corruption. In his address, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev aptly stated: “*Unless all segments of the population and the best specialists are involved in the fight against corruption, and unless all members of society are, so to speak, ‘vaccinated with honesty,’ we will not achieve the ambitious goals we have set for ourselves. We must shift from addressing the consequences of corruption to preventing it at its earliest stages.*”

Specifically, on January 3, 2017, the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Combating Corruption” (Law No. 419) was adopted. This law outlined the key directions of state policy in the field of anti-corruption and established a legal framework for such activities. To implement its provisions, several normative-legal acts were adopted. For example, Presidential Decree No. PD-5729, dated May 27, 2019, approved the “State Program on Combating Corruption for 2019–2020.” This decree established a special commission tasked with developing measures to enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts and defined its primary responsibilities. This decree also provided the first legal basis for elevating the processes of identifying, assessing, and preventing corruption risks to the level of legislation. Moreover, on June 30, 2020, Presidential Decree No. 6013, “On Additional Measures to Improve the Anti-Corruption System in the Republic of Uzbekistan,” was adopted. Concurrently, on June 29, 2020, the President issued a resolution establishing the Anti-Corruption Agency. This resolution marked a critical step in eradicating corruption-related crimes and developing effective measures to combat them.

Furthermore, on July 6, 2021, Presidential Decree No. PD-6257, “On Measures to Create an Environment of Zero Tolerance towards Corruption, Significantly Reduce Corruption Factors in Public and Social Administration, and Expand Public Participation in These

Efforts,” was adopted. This decree set forth priority tasks for anti-corruption policies in Uzbekistan.

It is also noteworthy that the Presidential Decree of January 28, 2022, “On the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026,” outlined several key goals for preventing corruption. Specifically, it emphasized eliminating corruption factors in public administration, implementing a merit-based recruitment system for public service positions, establishing mechanisms for continuous employee performance evaluation, preventing conflicts of interest in public service, expanding public oversight in the fight against corruption, and ensuring transparency.

Goal 84 of this decree specifically highlighted the need to identify sectors and areas prone to corruption, improve the efficiency of systems designed to address the causes and factors of corruption, and foster a culture of zero tolerance toward corruption among members of society.

According to the First Deputy Prosecutor General of the Republic of Uzbekistan, B.B. Valiyev, a total of 9,546 individuals committed various forms of corruption-related crimes over the past four years, resulting in damages amounting to nearly 3.2 trillion Uzbek soums to the interests of the state and citizens.

In developing anti-corruption policies, international organizations such as the UN, Transparency International, OECD, and OSCE, as well as governments of many countries, increasingly focus on approaches that enable corruption risk assessment [2]. Risk assessment is considered one of the most effective preventive mechanisms in combating corruption, as it ensures that measures are tailored to actual corruption schemes. However, there is no unified method for comprehensively and systematically assessing corruption risks [3].

In terms of addressing corruption, Uzbekistan has made significant efforts over time, achieving a score of 32 out

of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index [4]. Although Uzbekistan has not achieved a radical transformation in curbing corruption on a large scale, it has made considerable efforts. Nonetheless, challenges persist due to shortcomings in existing legislation and its practical application. Without addressing these legal gaps, loopholes, and errors, the goal of effectively combating and preventing corruption cannot be achieved.

It is necessary not only to address deficiencies in national legislation in a formal manner but also to integrate the experiences of developed countries with progressive anti-corruption systems into Uzbekistan's legal framework [5]. Furthermore, developing systemic mechanisms to ensure proper enforcement and establishing effective oversight of these laws' implementation is vital to achieving the intended goals [6]. After all, internationally published corruption indicators are often viewed as reflections of a country's democracy and development.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has rightfully stated: *"It is incorrect to say that there is no corruption. Corruption still exists among us. We must fight it together with the entire public."*

Corruption, a pervasive social phenomenon, has affected nearly every sector in Uzbekistan to some extent. Combating corruption has become not only a matter of international concern but also one of the most pressing issues within the Republic. Before addressing the challenges of combating and preventing corruption, it is crucial to define the term "*corruption*" and consider the perspectives of scholars and policymakers.

In some international legal instruments, the term "*corruption*" is defined concisely, highlighting its essential aspects. For example, Transparency International defines corruption as "*the abuse of entrusted power for private gain*" [7].

In Western countries, definitions of corruption vary based on economic,

political, legal, and social perspectives. For instance, researcher Karen Katz defines corruption as the misuse of authority by an individual for the purpose of gaining material or immaterial benefits [8]. In our opinion, although this definition does not fully encompass all aspects of corruption, it effectively captures its core essence.

Furthermore, scholars D. Mistree and A. Dibley from Stanford University define corruption as an act by an individual aimed at obtaining personal gain while undermining public trust in the organization to which they belong [9]. This definition is broad and suggests that not only specific actions but also an individual's psychological state should be considered a factor in corruption. Based on these definitions, corruption is not limited to greed or bribery; it manifests in various forms and is not always linked to material gain.

In Western countries, corruption has often been associated with social relationships such as kinship, clan affiliation, and ethnic ties [10]. Today, this phenomenon manifests through forms such as nepotism, favoritism toward in-laws, regionalism, and generational affiliations [11].

In our view, corruption should not be seen merely as a crime or an issue confined to public administration. Rather, it is a complex socio-economic and ethical problem affecting all spheres of society. It is unrealistic to expect that this pervasive issue can be completely eradicated in the short term. However, by consolidating socio-economic and organizational measures, improving the legal framework, and promoting public participation, it is possible to effectively protect society from this issue and reduce its social harm in the long term [12].

It is important to note that corruption can be studied from both a broad socio-philosophical perspective and a narrower socio-legal perspective. In a broad sense, the term means "*decay*" [13]. Corruption may refer to:

- Leading someone astray or yielding to influence in exchange for a bribe;
- Moral degradation or decay;
- Ethical corruption or distorted perceptions;
- Psychological disturbance or severe moral crisis.

Replacing the term “fight against corruption” with superficial slogans like “fight against bribery” can lead to ineffective measures that fail to reflect genuine reform in criminal theory or legal practice. Such an approach does not yield meaningful positive transformations [14].

The high level of concealment (latency) of bribery crimes, estimated at 90–95%, underscores the issue’s complexity [15]. Although the term “corruption” has frequently appeared in legislation and practice in recent years, neither Uzbekistan nor many other countries have developed a precise legal definition of “corruption,” resulting in a wide variety of corruption-related offenses.

In conclusion, to eliminate the factors creating conditions for corruption risks in public administration, prevent them, and develop effective measures and strategies, the following proposals are recommended:

- To prevent corruption-related risks in public administration, it is advisable to act based on the fundamental principles of the national legal system and promote the integrity, honesty, and responsibility of public officials, alongside other core values.

- To ensure that public officials perform their duties conscientiously and to a high standard, the code of professional ethics should be further refined and its effectiveness strengthened.

Conclusion

To conclude, while Uzbekistan has long faced challenges with entrenched corruption, notable strides have been made in recent years through substantial legal reforms and the establishment of anti-corruption bodies as a whole. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country has brought in effective anti-corruption strategies, adopted major international conventions, and laid the groundwork for institutional accountability. However, corruption continues to pose a serious socio-economic and ethical threat, deeply embedded across various sectors. Tackling this issue requires a more integrated and strategic approach that not only fills legal gaps but also ensures strict enforcement and fosters a transparent, responsible governance culture. Future efforts, in turn, must prioritize risk evaluation, civic engagement, and the bolstering of professional ethics in public service. Adopting successful global practices and expanding the definition of corruption beyond bribery are also crucial. Though complete elimination may not be immediate, consistent reforms can gradually alleviate its effects and enhance institutional integrity as a whole.

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