

Interview with Muborak Tashpulatova

Questioning Authority

Elections Today: How would you assess the health of civil society in Uzbekistan today? What is the largest problem facing civil society there at this time?

Muborak Tashpulatova: Well, it is like a body. The health of a body depends on what feeds it. Society is the same. There are diseases that affect political freedom, civic freedom and the third sector. If we are talking about political rights, we have no political opportunities, no freedom of speech and no freedom of association. Since the government closed down political parties, there has been no political opposition. Of course, it influences our work.



The most important challenge to developing civil society in Uzbekistan today is that all NGOs work with support from grants from sponsoring organizations. If there are no grants, there is no support and they cannot work. The international community tries to push NGOs to find a way to raise funds, but it is difficult because of the economic situation in Uzbekistan, which is very complicated. The business sector is weak and very few business organizations can support NGOs. The second problem is that we have no mechanism for institutionalizing the NGO sector. We need to build coalitions to address some of our bigger problems.

ET: How would you compare the experience of teaching young people versus teaching adults in the importance of active citizenship? Is there a 'generational' or other gap that makes it more challenging to work with one group or the other?



MT: We have worked with both youth and adults teaching active citizenship. Both groups are very important, but it has been our strategy to emphasize work with adults – we train teachers who then work daily with young people and prepare teaching materials.

Of course, there are generational problems. Most adults lived under Soviet rule. They have a lot of history from that time, and it is difficult for them to change. Uzbek tradition says that older people are always right, and you never say “no” to them even if

you know they are wrong. It is very difficult to change our traditions and culture. When we train teachers, we try to show them other ways to teach and encourage them to use them. We tell them to teach openly and to teach their students to think critically. This does not mean that they will lose power: it means that their students will develop a more open and objective viewpoint.

I cannot say that all teachers support this method, and this causes problems. We are teaching citizenship and there are only two or three other subjects in the curriculum. We tell teachers to teach citizenship democratically,

but then they return to an authoritarian style for other subjects. Different teachers may tell the students to forget about the democratic way. We work with the whole teacher community.

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We choose a team that wants to make a difference, and we offer special training for school officials. It works well. Some teachers do not like it, but most teachers are trained. When they come to class and try to use the method, then they understand that it does work.

ET: How can a teacher help to create active citizens? How much does it matter “what” is taught versus “how” it is taught?

MT: When we discuss the democratic method with science teachers, the first question is, “How can I use this method in math?” The democratic method can work even in the physical sciences and it is very important to use it. In our school, the main objective of our training is for teachers to develop cooperation among students. Students find a problem and work together to solve it. In that process, they improve their social skills, their negotiation skills, their critical thinking skills, their public speaking skills and their ability to plan the use of resources.

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