Public councils in Central Asia: state-society consultation

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Abstract: Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan - have introduced public councils into their systems of public administration. These consultative bodies are intended to function as platforms for state–society dialogue. However, the literature on consultative authoritarianism suggests that, in authoritarian contexts, states typically exert control over consultative institutions and mechanisms to manage and contain civic participation.

This comparative study investigates the extent to which the state controls public councils in Central Asia and explores the reasons behind these dynamics. Based on 40 semi-structured interviews with public council members and civil society representatives, as well as four focus groups conducted in 2024 across the four countries, the study offers the following findings.

In countries where civil society operates with a moderate degree of freedom - as indicated by V-Dem's Civil Society Participation Index - civil society representatives tend to possess stronger civic skills, such as articulating public demands and holding authorities accountable. As a result, public council members in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are better positioned to leverage these platforms to advance their interests. In response, the state remains more vigilant and imposes a range of regulatory controls over these bodies.

Conversely, in countries with weaker and more restricted civil societies, such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, public councils enjoy relatively greater operational flexibility and, in some cases, even collaborate with foreign donors. This reflects the state's perception that these councils pose a lower risk of contestation. This study contributes to the consultative authoritarianism literature by offering new empirical insights from Central Asia, illustrating how varying levels of civil society strength shape state strategies of control over consultative institutions.