

Activists Rubbish Book Defending Mahallas

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Author of new book says rights activists have painted a distorted picture of neighbourhood committees.

Human rights activists in Uzbekistan have condemned a recently-published book that seeks to discredit a highly critical report on the country's mahallas or neighbourhood committees.

The activists say the book, published by the Mahalla Foundation, reminds them of Soviet times when communist ideologists denounced anyone who criticised them as "enemies of the people".

The book, entitled *The Path of the People is the Correct Path*, denounces a 2003 report by Human Rights Watch, which claimed that mahallas - traditional neighbourhood committees which President Islam Karimov formalised into an arm of local government - effectively served as state surveillance organisations; the "eyes and ears" of the regime.

The controversial new title, written by Azam Gazoiboev, the head of the Mahalla Foundation, dismisses the Human Rights Watch claims as fabrications, but at the same time inadvertently gives them credence.

"To maintain peace and calm in the mahalla and in the country as a whole, controlling religious events and the work of the mosques is the mahalla's duty..." writes Gazoiboev.

Human rights activist Abdujalil Boimatov says Gazoiboev clearly contradicts himself, "These remarks show the main role of the mahalla committees and confirms the thrust of the Human Rights Watch Report."

In his book, Gazoiboev is scathing of those who campaign against government abuses, "The grandiloquent titles of 'human rights defenders' that they give themselves are enough to amaze anyone. But we know that religious extremists and their supporters also present themselves as defenders of human rights."

According to Gazoiboev, rights activists are ignorant of the national traditions and customs of the Uzbek people; receive information from people who cannot be trusted; and consider themselves smarter and fairer than others.

A senior official in the Mahalla Foundation, Kodirjon Tillaboev, has denied that the book is an attempt to discredit the human rights movement, insisting that it is merely an analysis of the place of the neighbourhood committee in society.

This has no truck with activists who say the book reminds them of the Soviet period when officials dismissed critics as "enemies of the people".

"It seems that the old communist Azam Gadoiboev still clings to this old communist [tactic]," said rights campaigner Tolib Yakubov. "The book shows the mentality and level of the author - and also those who ordered its publication - who still think that the people will believe in this Soviet rubbish."

Boimatov says Gadoiboev's writing was reminiscent of the vocabulary of the Bolsheviks in the 1930s, when

everything was black and white and the Communist Party declared, “Those not with us are against us”.

In the Fergana valley, where suspicion of Tashkent is strongest, there are signs that ordinary people have little time for the Gadoiboev book.

“People laugh, they don’t believe the author. Firstly, they are repelled by the old Soviet style and secondly know that the mahalla has become the mouthpiece and executor of the authorities’ will, “ said Matlyuba Azamatova, adding that everyone she knows who’s read it have had almost the same reaction.

Nonetheless, there are concerns amongst some analysts that the book may turn ordinary people against rights activists, in particular those from abroad.

“Some of those who read it may develop prejudices against international organisation, as the Uzbek authorities want to force them out of the country,” said Independent sociologist Komron Aliev.

Yakobov believes the book is the latest stage in a government campaign against foreign organisations, which began with the closure last spring of the local branch of the Open Society Institute.

More recently, there have been attempts to make it difficult for them to register and receive funds.

The campaign appears to have been prompted by the significant role played by non-government organisations, NGOs, in the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in November 2003.

President Karimov’s distrust of NGOs was recently highlighted in a newspaper interview during the “Orange Revolution” in the Ukraine.

“Preparations for the current changes in the Ukraine started back in 1995. Look at the number of non-government organisations there, and the sources that finance them – and everything will be clear.

“ Incidentally, we are currently keeping track of funds and grants allocated to [NGOs] to find out whether projects are humanitarian or covert preparation for some new revolution.”

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