

Uzbekistan: No Bribes, Honestly

Author: IWPR

A new initiative where government officials in Uzbekistan must promise not to engage in corrupt practices seems doomed to fail. Both the recipients and givers of bribes say the practices is widespread and impossible to root out.

In early February, local government staff in 22 districts of Tashkent province were required to submit written statements that they would not accept bribes.

“The [provincial] governor was obliged to take this step soon after two of his staff members were arrested in the act of taking bribes,” said a local government employee. “They are in custody and an investigation is under way.”

Uzbekistan has legislation designed to counter corruption and its police have special anti-corruption units, but to little effect.

The international watchdog Transparency International places Uzbekistan 174th on a list of 180 countries listed on its Corruption Perceptions Index for 2009.

The “honesty pledge” campaign began last summer when the higher education minister, Azimjon Parpiev, forced all university lecturers to make written statements that they would not take illicit payments from their students. Next up were the police and other law-enforcement agencies, who are now required to produce such statements every three months.

Local observers say corruption is endemic in Uzbekistan, and even simple things like obtaining a document from a state institution require money to change hands.

Shukhrat Rakhimov, 65, from Tashkent, said, “I had to obtain confirmation from the power company that I did not owe any debts for electricity. Before I managed to get it, I had to come to their office several times and stand in a queue, until my friend told me that all I had to do was to offer a bribe. So I paid money and got the confirmation.”

Another man admitted that he often slipped some money to tax inspectors and hospital staff, and said that in his experience, the practice was universal.

“I asked my friends about their interactions with officials, and not one of them had never paid a bribe,” he said. “Even disabled people have to offer bribes to the social welfare authorities when they need to obtain a document confirming that they really are disabled.”

A policeman said that almost every week, he hears about fellow-officers being arrested for accepting bribes. People commonly bribe police to avoid traffic fines or to get detained relatives released.

Like others who are now being made to sign promises of honesty, this policeman was sceptical that corruption could be eliminated.

A local government official in the Kibray district in Tashkent region agreed, saying, "It's ridiculous to believe corruption can be eliminated by means of written promises. Quite the reverse - they will result in a rise in the going rate for bribes. After all, the risk we are taking is getting bigger, too."

(NBCA is an IWPR-funded project to create a multilingual news analysis and comment service for Central Asia, drawing on the expertise of a broad range of political observers across the region. The project ran from August 2006 to September 2007, covering all five regional states. With new funding, the service has resumed, covering Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.)

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