



THE POSITION OF AKSAKAL IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF TASHKENT CITY IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the role and functions of the aksakal institution within the system of local administration in Tashkent following the city's conquest by the Russian Empire. It demonstrates that the office of aksakal had originated as a traditional institution of indigenous self-governance, which the colonial administration subsequently adapted and incorporated as an instrument for governing the local population. Drawing on archival documents, the periodical press, and the works of historians, the study examines the electoral procedure for selecting aksakals, the hierarchy linking the chief city elder and the district elders, their salaries and administrative apparatus, and the transformation of the office into the position of starshina after the 1892 uprising. The article concludes that, despite operating within the colonial framework, those who held the office of aksakal sought to protect the interests of the local community and contributed to the continuity of national traditions of governance.*

Keywords: *Turkestan, Tashkent, empire, aksakal, local administration, daha (urban district), ellikbashi, elections, traditions of governance.*

INTRODUCTION

Following the conquest of Tashkent by the Russian Empire, a colonial model of urban administration was introduced for governing the city's population. The supreme authority in the city was the city head, who served as a representative of the Tsarist administration. In organizing the municipal administration, the colonial government was compelled to accommodate local customary practices, for the population was accustomed to the existing administrative structure, and the imperial authorities fully recognized this reality.

The administration of the indigenous quarters of Tashkent, which were divided into four dahas (districts), was entrusted to officials holding the position of aksakal. The

title aksakal was also employed in the management of irrigation, trade, and economic affairs; there were, for example, arik-aksakals (heads responsible for irrigation canals) and market aksakals (market supervisors), among others. This designation had long been used among the local population for community leadership and governance, becoming an enduring national tradition. Over time, its functions and authorities became increasingly institutionalized, and throughout the medieval period the title aksakal was widely applied in the administration of various spheres of social and economic life. The present article examines how this indigenous institution functioned and was transformed within the colonial administrative system of Tashkent.

MAIN PART

Alongside the title aksakal, the designation mingbashi was also used. According to Dobrosmyslov, the dahas (urban districts) of the city were administered by mingbashis (Dobrosmyslov, 1912:43). The title aksakal was employed within the irrigation system, where officials known as arik-aksakals were responsible for regulating and overseeing water distribution. Relying on Dobrosmyslov's account, the historian Vasily Bartold and several subsequent researchers argued that Tashkent had been governed by mingbashis during the period of the Kokand Khanate, and that under Tsarist rule, beginning in 1867, this office came to be known as aksakal (Bartold, 1927:191).

However, the position of mingbashi in the Khanate period was an administrative office, whereas among the population a variety of titles – including ellikbashi (head of fifty households), yuzbashi (head of one hundred households), mingbashi (head of one thousand households), and aksakal – were used concurrently to designate leaders of communities of different sizes. These designations were not necessarily formal administrative ranks; rather, terms such as yuzbashi and ellikbashi generally referred to leaders in relation to the approximate size of the community under their supervision.

In the official sense, the individual responsible for administering a particular community was referred to as an aksakal, and the title was often appended to the personal name of the officeholder as part of his designation. Evidence from indigenous historical sources, including *Tarikhi Aliquli Amirlashkar* by Muhammad Yunus Toyib and *Tarikhi Jadidai Toshkand* by Muhammad Solihkhoja, demonstrates that within the Kokand

Khanate the leader of a particular community was commonly referred to as an aksakal.

In particular, the historian O. Sultonov, who conducted extensive research on the historical work *Tarikhi Jadidai Toshkand*, emphasizes that during the period of the Kokand Khanate, city governors administered Tashkent through reliance on the aksakals of its four dahas (Sultonov, 2009:112–113). The practice of referring to an aksakal as a mingbashi continued among the population during the period of Tsarist colonial rule.

Particularly after the uprising of 1892, when the term aksakal gradually fell out of official usage, the local population began to employ the designation mingbashi in place of the Russian administrative term *starshina* (elder). This shift is also reflected in archival documents, where from that period onward the term aksakal appears less frequently and is largely replaced by *starshina* or *mingbashi* (NAU, f. 36, d. 4981, l. 32). In later press materials, however, the title was occasionally rendered in the combined form “*starshina-aksakal*.”

During the period when Tashkent formed part of the Kokand Khanate, the city was governed by an official holding the position of *bek*. After the Russian Empire conquered the city and introduced a new administrative order, this office was abolished, and responsibility for administering the city’s four dahas was entrusted to the chief aksakal. The prominent historians N. Abdurakhimova and F. Ergashev note that all *mirshabs* (police officials), *mirobs* (water administrators), and *qazis* (judges) were subordinate to the chief aksakal (Abdurakhimova & Ergashev, 2002:55).

According to F. Ozadaev, the aksakal not only exercised administrative authority but also supervised the policing system within the city (Ozadaev, 1961:107). However, rather than focusing on the institutional functions of the office, the author tends to portray the aksakal primarily as a “trusted representative” of the Tsarist government among the local population, thereby diminishing the significance and status of the position itself. For example, in his interpretation of the 1892 uprising, the chief aksakal Muhammad Yaqub Karimberdi oghli is presented as the principal instigator of the so-called “cholera revolt,” suggesting that the popular uprising was directed not against the colonial regime but rather against the aksakal himself; consequently, the aksakal is depicted as a fearful figure and a mere “servant” of the colonial administration. Historical studies of the 1892 Tashkent cholera uprising indicate, however, that the unrest emerged primarily

in response to anti-cholera measures imposed by the colonial authorities, which were perceived by the local population as violating established religious and cultural norms (Ozadaev, 1961:240–244).

After Tashkent was designated as the administrative center of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship, the city was formally governed under the provisions of the Provisional Statute of 1867 through the office of aksakal, whose holder was elected for a three-year term. In this regard, the colonial administration did not create a new position; rather, it adopted the already existing indigenous institution of the aksakal as a recognized administrative office. Officials responsible for governing the city's dahas were elected for three-year terms by the ellikbashis, who, in turn, were elected by the residents of the neighborhoods they represented. The aksakal was responsible for confirming the election of the ellikbashis chosen by the local communities, and candidates nominated for the office of aksakal were permitted to assume their duties only with the approval of the Governor-General (NAU, f. 1, d. 55, l. 1).

Elections to the office of aksakal were conducted with considerable public interest and competition, and individuals who enjoyed respect and prestige within the community often put forward their candidacies. The ellikbashis cast separate votes for each candidate by placing either a white or a black ballot stone into the candidate's designated ballot box: a white stone signified support for the candidate, whereas a black stone indicated opposition (Turkiston Viloyati Gazeti, 1905, no. 11). Following the vote, representatives of the colonial administration publicly counted the ballot stones in the presence of the ellikbashis and announced the winner.

According to the 1886 Regulation on the Administration of the Turkestan Territory, the candidate who received the majority of votes and whose election was subsequently confirmed by the Military Governor of the Syr-Darya Oblast was officially entrusted with the administration of the district. Election proceedings were generally held in the most prominent public gathering places within each dacha. In the Sebzor district, elections were most often conducted at the Beklarbegi Madrasa, while in the Beshyaghoch, Shaykhantakhur, and Kukcha districts they were usually held in the courtyards of the principal congregational mosques. These locations reflected the continuing importance of traditional communal institutions and public spaces in the functioning of local self-government under colonial rule.

For example, elections of elders (aksakals) and judges (qazis) held in January 1913 were organized at the Beklarbegi Madrasa for the Sebzor district, at the Shaykhantahur Mosque for the Shaykhantahur district, at the Jom Mosque for the Beshyogoch district, and at the Tokhtajonboyvachcha Mosque for the Kukcha district (NAU, f. 36, d. 6016, l. 4). Furthermore, elections were generally conducted on Fridays, when the largest number of residents gathered. For instance, the election of the elder of the Beshyogoch district in 1905 took place on the last Friday of February, while the corresponding election in the Kukcha district was held on the following Friday, at the beginning of March (Turkiston Viloyati Gazeti, 1905, no. 9).

In matters related to district administration, the district elder was required to report to the city head, and, relying on ten yigits (assistants or subordinate officials) under his authority, he managed the affairs of the district. The city elder, in turn, was responsible for the part of Tashkent inhabited by the indigenous population, which consisted of four districts, and the district elders were directly subordinate to him. The city elder (shahar aksakal), referred to in Russian as the starshiy aksakal ("senior elder") and commonly known among the local population by this title, exercised authority not only over the mahallas within the city but also over the settlements located outside the city boundaries; in addition, he supervised matters related to irrigation, agriculture, the daily life of the population, and the broader socio-economic conditions of the region.

Monthly salaries were allocated to both the chief city elder and the district elders. The chief elder received 75 rubles per month (amounting to 900 rubles annually), while a district elder received 54 rubles and 16 kopecks per month, equivalent to 650 rubles annually (NAU, f. 36, d. 3306, ll. 1–5). The colonial administration sought not only to govern the local population through indigenous institutions but also to finance the salaries of its administrative personnel through revenues collected from the local inhabitants: the salaries of the elders were paid from funds collected from the urban population, and prior to the elections the ellikbashis were required to agree to collect from the population the funds necessary to pay the elder's salary, only after which could the electoral process commence (NAU, f. 36, d. 3306, l. 57). Under the authority of the chief elder, each district maintained seventeen foot young men (assistants or guards) and two mounted young men (Turkiston Viloyati Gazeti, 1905, no. 12). In addition, a

strashnik (supervisory officer) was assigned to each district to oversee their activities, and both the chief elder and the district elders were assisted by a secretary (mirza). The chief elder also possessed the authority to appoint his own interpreter; archival records indicate that in 1891 I. Umryokhujayev dismissed his interpreter, Pyotr Alexandrov, on the grounds of unsatisfactory performance and appointed Yusuf Karabashev, a teacher at the Turkestan Teachers' Seminary, as his replacement (NAU, f. 36, d. 3306, l. 9).

Following the "cholera riot" of 1892, the position of aksakal was officially renamed starshina as part of the colonial administration's response to the uprising. In essence, however, starshina was merely the Russian translation of the term aksakal: although official documents employed the designation starshina, the local population continued to refer to these officials as aksakals. The office of the chief city elder was abolished in the aftermath of the revolt.

Initially, the old city was divided into two administrative sectors: the first comprising the Shaykhantahur and Sebzor districts, and the second consisting of the Kukcha and Beshyogoch districts. An assistant to the police prefect (pristav) was appointed to each sector, while a supervisory position known as the okolotochnyi (district inspector) was established for each district. A few months later, the position of district police inspector (okolotochnyi nadziratel) was introduced in every district, and the office of assistant pristav was subsequently abolished.

Individuals appointed to the position of district inspector were representatives of the colonial administration. Their formal responsibility was to oversee the local administrative system and ensure "security" within the territory of the old city; in reality, however, their primary function was to prevent any renewed popular unrest, since the colonial authorities were well aware that public resentment toward the colonial regime had intensified considerably following the uprising of 1892.

At the same time, the office of district elder was officially redesignated as starshina. The administrative hierarchy now consisted of the district inspector at the top, followed by a locally appointed strashnik under his authority. Depending on the size of the district, the strashnik supervised between seven and eight mounted police officers (mirshabs) and between nine and eleven foot police officers, who were recruited from among the local population. District elders also retained approximately ten yigits (assistants), whose

appointments were confirmed by the city head upon the recommendation of the elder.

As administrators of the indigenous population of Tashkent's old city, the aksakals were accountable to the city head and regularly reported on local affairs. They were responsible for confirming the election of *ellikbashis* and supervising their activities, and, according to archival records, elections of *ellikbashis* were conducted in the presence of the district elder. For example, during an election held on 2 October 1908 in the Kesakkurgan neighborhood of the Kukcha district, representatives of 35 out of 50 households gathered before the district *starshina*, Normuhammad Daminboyev, and elected Mirzakhoja Rahimkhojayeov to replace Tullagan Okhund as *ellikbashi* (NAU, f. 36, d. 4434, l. 60).

Individuals serving as aksakals were generally active, enterprising, and highly respected members of society, typically between forty and fifty years of age. For instance, in the 1880 election for the position of elder of the Beshyogoch district, Nuriddinboy Mirtursun ogli, then thirty-seven years old, secured victory by receiving the votes of thirty out of forty-two *ellikbashis*, and he subsequently served in this position for more than a decade (NAU, f. 36, d. 3106, l. 77). Similarly, Mulla Kalonbek Makhzum, elder of the Sebzor district, was forty-two years old when he won the election of 1887, and Inogomkhoja Umryokhojayeov, who served as chief elder of the city, was fifty-three years old when he was removed from office in 1892.

In the Beshyogoch district, the office of elder was held at various times by Nuriddinboy Mirtursun ogli, Muhammadsharif Mirhalim ogli, Sodiqbek Rosulbek ogli, and Mulla Orifjon Mulla Salimjon ogli. In the Kukcha district, individuals such as Mirafzalbek, Shodibek Olimbek ogli, Muhammad Rosul, Ibrohimbek Yusufbek ogli, Saidahrar Saidakbarkhoja ogli, and Mulla Normuhammad Daminboy ogli served as elders. Likewise, in the Sebzor district, Mirfayziboy Mirqurbonboy ogli, Kalonbek Makhzum Mulla Normuhammad ogli, Sobirkhon Muhammadkhon ogli, and Usmonkhoja Inoyatkhoja ogli carried out the responsibilities of leadership among the local population. In Shaykhantahur, the largest district of Tashkent, the office was held by figures such as Abduhamidkhoja Shodmonkhoja ogli, Abdukarim Berdiboy ogli, Muhammadyoqub Karimberdi ogli, Asrorquli Ustunboy ogli, and Mulla Usmon Toshkenboy ogli.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the position of aksakal occupied an important place within the administrative structure governing the areas of Tashkent inhabited by the indigenous population. Although it had originated as a traditional institution of local self-governance, the colonial administration adapted it into a recognized office of imperial city management, complete with an electoral procedure, a salaried hierarchy, and a supporting administrative apparatus, and after the 1892 uprising it was formally renamed starshina. Despite operating within the framework of the colonial regime, those who held this office sought to protect the interests of the local community and contributed to the preservation and continuity of national traditions of governance.

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