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The Historical and Social Significance of the Development of the Awards System of the Republic of Uzbekistan at a New Level

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Abstract. This study traces how the state awards system of Uzbekistan was formed after independence and reshaped since 2017. It combines a historical-legal analysis of the 1995 Law "On State Awards," its 2018 new edition and the acts governing the "Mard O'g'lon" State Award and the Zulfiya State Prize with a content analysis of all 140 "Mard O'g'lon" recipients officially listed for 2022–2026, coded by primary status under mutually exclusive rules. The 2018 edition codified 34 honorary titles, 11 orders and 4 medals and widened nominating rights. Regional parity was strictly observed, with two awardees from each of the 14 territorial units every year. Learners were the largest group (47.1%), followed by the uniformed services (25.7%), but in 2026 the uniformed services rose to 42.9% and learners fell to 28.6% ($\chi^2 = 6.59$, df = 2, p = 0.037 versus 2022–2025). In 2018 the Zulfiya Prize doubled its quota from 14 to 28 and widened its age range to 14–30 years. Open publication of recipient lists supports the legitimacy of state recognition, whereas undisclosed selection criteria remain the main gap.

Keywords: State Awards, Zulfiya State Prize, Recognition Policy

1 Introduction

Awards are among the oldest instruments a state uses to say, publicly and at low fiscal cost, that a citizen's conduct is valued. Orders, medals, honorary titles and state prizes confer esteem that cannot be bought on a market, and for that reason they have long been treated as a distinct policy tool rather than a ceremonial afterthought [1], [2]. A substantial body of research in economics and management now shows that even purely symbolic awards change behavior: they raise performance in field experiments, improve the retention of volunteers, and signal what an organization considers worthy of imitation [3]–[6]. The same research also documents the costs of poorly designed awards, including crowding-out effects, envy among non-recipients and the erosion of meaning when awards proliferate [7]–[9].

For post-Soviet states, the awards system carries an additional layer of meaning. After 1991, the new republics inherited the Soviet practice of using labor and military decorations to communicate official values, and each had to decide which symbols to keep, which to discard, and which to invent [10], [11]. In Uzbekistan, the first legal framework for national awards was laid down by the Law "On State Awards" of December 22, 1995 [12]. Its new edition in 2018 [13], [14] coincided with a wider program of administrative reform launched after the 2016 leadership transition, which scholars describe as a controlled opening that modernized state institutions while retaining a strong executive [15]. Within this program, youth and women became explicit targets of recognition policy: the "Mard O'g'lon" State Award for young men was created in 2017 [16], and the rules of the Zulfiya State Prize for young women, established in 1999, were substantially revised in 2018 [17], [18].

Existing studies by Uzbek scholars have described these changes mainly in legal and normative terms [19]–[22]. What is still missing is evidence on how the reformed system operates in practice: who actually receives the new awards, whether stated principles such as regional equality are observed, and whether the composition of recipients is stable from year to year. International research on awards has rarely examined state honors in Central Asia, and the Uzbek literature has rarely used systematic data on recipients. This article addresses that gap. It asks three questions: (1) How did the legal and institutional framework of state awards in Uzbekistan evolve from 1995 to the present? (2) What does the officially published composition of "Mard O'g'lon" recipients in 2022–2026 reveal about the priorities of recognition policy? (3) How do the reforms of youth- and women-oriented awards relate to the legitimacy and transparency of the awards system as a whole?

The contribution is twofold. Empirically, the study provides the first complete, rule-based coding of all 140 "Mard O'g'lon" recipients announced over five consecutive years, correcting inconsistencies in earlier descriptive counts. Conceptually, it interprets the Uzbek case through the economics of awards and the literature on transparency and legitimacy, showing where the reformed system conforms to good practice and where it still falls short.

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2 Source Analysis

The study draws on three groups of sources. The first consists of normative and legal acts. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 176-I "On State Awards" of December 22, 1995 established the initial post-independence framework, under which state awards were instituted by the Oliy Majlis [12]. Law No. ZRU-473 of April 11, 2018 restated the law in a new edition, codifying the hierarchy of awards and the procedure for nominating, conferring, wearing and revoking them [13]. Contemporary reporting on the Senate's approval of the new edition records its key quantitative parameters: the title "O'zbekiston Qahramoni," 34 honorary titles, 11 orders, 4 medals and the Certificate of Honor of the Republic of Uzbekistan, together with a wider list of bodies entitled to nominate candidates and the President's right to initiate awards independently [14]. Youth-oriented recognition rests on Decree No. PF-5106 of July 5, 2017 on state youth policy [23] and Resolution No. PQ-3402 of November 21, 2017, which established the "Mard O'g'lon" State Award and approved its regulation [16]. The Zulfiya State Prize is governed by Decree No. PF-2326 of June 10, 1999 [17], as amended by Decree No. PF-5389 of March 29, 2018 [18]. The official texts were consulted through LexUZ, the national legislation database [24].

The second group consists of official recipient lists. The President's website publishes each award resolution together with an annex listing every recipient by full name, position and represented region [25]. The lists for 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026 [26]–[30] form the data set for the quantitative analysis. Press reports and official news items were used to confirm dates, ceremonies and changes in eligibility rules [31]–[35]. Because news items are secondary, they were used only for facts that could not be read directly from legal texts and were cross-checked against the primary acts wherever possible.

The third group is scholarly literature. Studies of Uzbek awards by D. Abdullaev and by Y. Matiyeva analyze the role of awards in public administration, social motivation and state–society relations [19]–[22]. These are complemented by international work on the economics of awards [36]–[39], on recognition and esteem [1], [2], on legitimacy and transparency in government [40]–[43], and on state ideology, national identity and gender policy in Uzbekistan [11], [44], [45]. Taken together, the three groups allow the legal design of the system to be compared with its observable outputs and assessed against established findings.

3 Method

The study follows a mixed design in which a historical-legal analysis is combined with a quantitative content analysis of official recipient lists. The historical-legal component applies the principles of historicism, systematicity and objectivity. Each act listed in Section 2 was read in its official text and coded for four attributes: the body that establishes an award, the body that confers it, the eligibility criteria (age, sex, field, territory), and the material benefits attached. The resulting sequence of legal changes is summarized chronologically in Table 1.

The quantitative component covers the population, not a sample, of "Mard O'g'lon" recipients announced between 2022 and 2026 (5 years × 28 recipients = 140 persons). The five annexes were downloaded from the President's website in October 2026 [26]–[30]. Each recipient was assigned to exactly one category according to the position stated in the annex, which reflects the person's primary status at the time of the award: (L) learners, including school pupils, bachelor's, master's and doctoral students, cadets and independent researchers; (U) uniformed services, including the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, the Border Troops of the State Security Service, internal affairs bodies, customs and emergency services; (E) educators and researchers in employment; (S) athletes and coaches; (C) culture, arts and media; (B) business, industry and engineering; and (Y) youth and community work. The represented region shown in brackets in each annex was recorded separately.

Fourteen boundary cases were resolved by fixed rules rather than case-by-case judgment. Students of sports universities and pupils of Olympic training centers were coded as learners because the annex states their enrollment; cadets of the Customs Institute were coded as learners for the same reason; a sports instructor of the National Guard and a commander at a military music lyceum were coded as uniformed services because their employer is a uniformed body; a senior lecturer at a military institute and teachers at children's music and art schools were coded as educators; and heads of private training centers were coded as business. Frequencies and percentages were computed for each year. Differences in composition were tested with Pearson's chi-square test on a three-category collapse (learners, uniformed services, all others) to keep expected cell counts above five, and with Fisher's exact test for single categories. All coding was carried out by the author; the coding sheet is available on request, and its rules are reported here so that the counts can be reproduced.

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4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The legal development of the system falls into two phases (Table 1). In the first phase, from 1995 to 2016, the Law "On State Awards" created a national hierarchy that replaced Soviet decorations, while the Zulfiya State Prize, established in 1999, became the main state award reserved for young women [12], [17]. The second phase began in 2017, when a cluster of acts on youth policy created the "Mard O'g'lon" State Award for young men, and continued in 2018 with the new edition of the law and the revision of the Zulfiya Prize [13], [16], [18], [23].

Table 1. Main legal milestones in the development of the state awards system of Uzbekistan.

Date	Act	Main content
Dec 22, 1995	Law No. 176-I "On State Awards"	First national framework; state awards instituted by the Oliy Majlis [12]
Jun 10, 1999	Decree No. PF-2326	Zulfiya State Prize for talented girls; one laureate per territorial unit, aged 14–22 [17], [35]
Jul 5, 2017	Decree No. PF-5106	Reform of state youth policy; basis for the "Mard O'g'lon" award [23]
Nov 21, 2017	Resolution No. PQ-3402	"Mard O'g'lon" State Award; two young men per territorial unit, aged 14–30, conferred on the eve of Youth Day [16], [31]
Mar 29, 2018	Decree No. PF-5389	Zulfiya Prize: two laureates per territorial unit (28 in total), age range 14–30 [18], [34]
Apr 11, 2018	Law No. ZRU-473	New edition: "O'zbekiston Qahramoni," 34 honorary titles, 11 orders, 4 medals, Certificate of Honor; wider nominating rights [13], [14]

Under Resolution No. PQ-3402, candidates for the "Mard O'g'lon" award are reviewed by the Commission on State Awards and Heraldry under the President, which submits proposals to the head of state; the award is conferred by presidential resolution and carries a cash prize equal to 50 times the base calculation amount (originally 50 times the minimum monthly wage), a diploma and a breast badge [16]. Laureates who are pupils or bachelor's students may enter the next level of higher education on a state grant without entrance examinations [16]. The award covers science, education, medicine, culture, literature, the arts, sports, production, military service and law enforcement, and is intended for young men aged 14 to 30 [16], [31]. The Zulfiya State Prize follows a parallel design for young women: since 2018 it is awarded to two candidates from each of the 14 territorial units (the Republic of Karakalpakstan, 12 regions and the city of Tashkent), with the same cash prize and comparable admission privileges [18], [34], [35]. Before 2018 the prize was normally limited to one laureate per territorial unit (14 in total) and to candidates aged 14 to 22 [34], [35]. The reform therefore doubled the annual quota and extended eligibility to women in postgraduate study and early careers.

Table 2 and Figure 1 present the composition of "Mard O'g'lon" recipients. Regional parity was observed without exception: in each of the five years, every territorial unit was represented by exactly two recipients. Over the whole period, learners formed the largest group (66 of 140; 47.1%), followed by members of the uniformed services (36; 25.7%), employed educators and researchers (13; 9.3%), culture, arts and media (9; 6.4%), sport (8; 5.7%) and business, industry and engineering (7; 5.0%). One recipient (0.7%), a neighborhood youth leader awarded in 2026, was coded as youth and community work.

Table 2. Primary status of "Mard O'g'lon" State Award recipients, 2022–2026 (n = 28 per year).

Category	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total (%)
Learners	16	13	14	15	8	66 (47.1)
Uniformed services	6	7	6	5	12	36 (25.7)
Educators and researchers	2	3	3	3	2	13 (9.3)
Sport	1	1	3	0	3	8 (5.7)
Culture, arts and media	0	2	1	5	1	9 (6.4)
Business, industry and engineering	3	2	1	0	1	7 (5.0)
Youth and community work	0	0	0	0	1	1 (0.7)
Total	28	28	28	28	28	140 (100.0)

The composition was stable from 2022 to 2025, when learners accounted for 46.4–57.1% of recipients and the uniformed services for 17.9–25.0%. The 2026 list departs from this pattern: learners fell to 8 (28.6%) and the uniformed services rose to 12 (42.9%), the largest share recorded in the period. Compared with the pooled 2022–2025 distribution, the 2026 composition differs significantly ($\chi^2 = 6.59$, df = 2, $p = 0.037$). Single-category tests point in the same direction: the odds of a recipient belonging to the uniformed services were 2.75

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times higher in 2026 than in 2022–2025 (Fisher's exact p = 0.029), and the odds of being a learner were lower (odds ratio 0.37, p = 0.034). When all five years are compared jointly, however, the heterogeneity is not significant ($\chi^2 = 7.64$, df = 8, p = 0.470), so the 2026 shift should be read as a notable single-year change rather than an established trend.

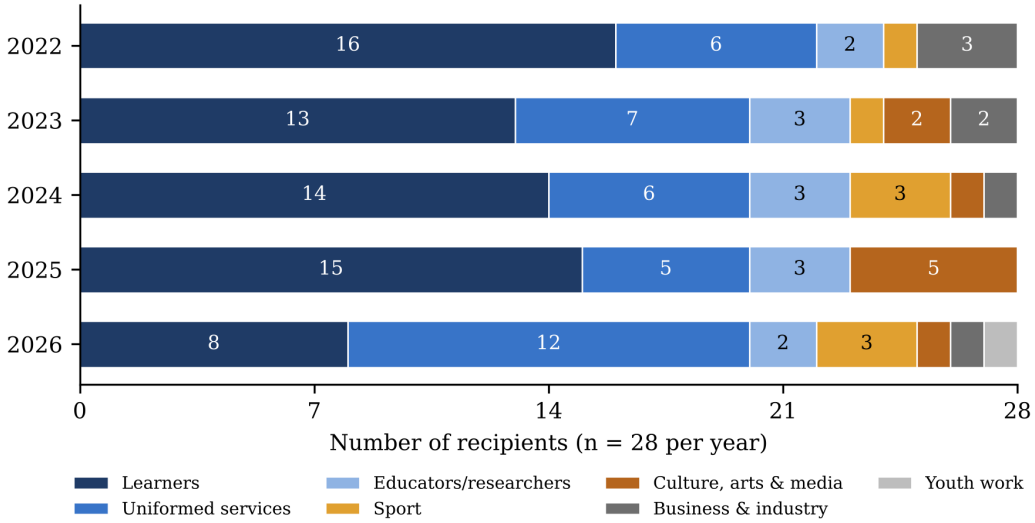


Figure 1. Composition of "Mard O'g'lon" State Award recipients by primary status, 2022–2026. Source: author's coding of the official lists [26]–[30].

Two further patterns emerge from the lists. First, the represented region does not always coincide with the place of work or study. In 2026, for example, an officer of the Tashkent city internal affairs department represented the Kashkadarya region, and a Tashkent city customs officer represented the Namangan region [30], which indicates that the regional quota is applied by origin rather than by current residence. Second, the award has become part of a broader package of youth recognition. In 2026, the "Mard O'g'lon" resolution was issued together with a decree conferring the "Kelajak Bunyodkori" medal on active young people, and both awards were presented at a single ceremony on Youth Day [32], [33].

These counts differ from earlier descriptive figures for 2026, which reported 11 uniformed-service recipients, 10 in education and science and 5 in sport, totals that sum to more than 28 because some persons were counted twice. Applying mutually exclusive rules removes this double counting and makes year-to-year comparison possible.

4.2 Discussion

The legal analysis confirms that the awards system of independent Uzbekistan was built in two stages: a foundation laid in 1995 and a consolidation in 2018. The new edition did more than add awards. By listing 34 honorary titles, 11 orders and 4 medals in the law itself, by widening the circle of nominating bodies, and by assigning a defined role to the Commission on State Awards and Heraldry, it made the hierarchy explicit and the procedure more predictable [13], [14]. Studies of other post-Soviet systems show that award statutes encode the values a state wishes to project [10]. In Uzbekistan, the creation of "Mard O'g'lon" and the revision of the Zulfiya Prize place youth, education and women's achievement close to the center of this value hierarchy, continuing a long tradition in which the state has used cultural and symbolic instruments to shape national identity [11], [44], [45].

The economics of awards helps explain why such instruments are attractive to governments. Awards cost little relative to their perceived value, are highly visible, and can build loyalty between giver and recipient [6], [36], [39]. They also act as signals: they tell outsiders, who cannot judge an achievement directly, which persons and which kinds of conduct the giver regards as exemplary, although the signal is only as reliable as the selection behind it [39], [46]. Field evidence shows that recognition alone can raise effort and persistence [3], [4], [47], and that honors tend to accompany, rather than cause, sustained high performance [48]. The "Mard O'g'lon" design combines symbolic and material elements, namely public recognition, a cash prize and admission to higher education without examinations. This combination is likely to strengthen the incentive effect for pupils and students, who made up almost half of all recipients. It also carries risks noted in the literature. Rewards tied to one dimension of behavior can crowd out effort in others [7], and the value of an

award declines if it is perceived as routine or overly abundant [8], [9]. Keeping the annual quota fixed at 28, as both "Mard O‘g‘lon" and the Zulfiya Prize do, is consistent with the advice to protect scarcity [38].

The shift in the 2026 list toward the uniformed services deserves careful interpretation. It is consistent with the stated scope of the award, which has always included military service and law enforcement [16], and with the emphasis on patriotism in youth policy. At the same time, one year of data cannot show whether this represents a deliberate reorientation or ordinary variation in nominations, and the five-year test does not support a lasting trend. The result therefore marks a question for future monitoring rather than a conclusion. If the shift persists, it would mean that a symbol originally framed around academic and creative achievement is increasingly used to reward service in the security sector.

The most important institutional change may be informational. Every resolution since at least 2022 has been published with a complete, named list of recipients, their positions and regions [25]–[30]. This practice can be described as an "open recognition" model. It allows citizens, journalists and researchers to verify whether stated rules such as regional parity are respected, and the present study shows that they are. Research on legitimacy suggests that people accept the decisions of authorities more readily when procedures are visible and perceived as fair [40]. Experimental work on transparency, however, warns that disclosure alone does not automatically raise trust; its effect depends on what is disclosed and on prior attitudes [41]–[43]. The Uzbek lists disclose outcomes, but not the evaluation criteria, the number of applicants or the reasons for selection. Publishing these elements, for instance an annual summary of nominations by region and field and the scoring rules used by the Commission, would move the system from outcome transparency to process transparency and address the concerns about objectivity raised in earlier work [20].

The analysis has limitations. It covers only one youth award in detail and only five years of recipient data; the Zulfiya Prize lists and the general state awards conferred on Independence Day were analyzed only at the level of legal rules. The coding relies on positions as stated in the official annexes and was performed by a single coder, so inter-coder reliability could not be estimated. Statistical tests on 28 recipients per year have limited power, and the comparison of 2026 with earlier years was not specified before the data were examined. Future studies could extend the coding to the Zulfiya Prize and to the "Kelajak Bunyodkori" medal, add a second coder, and link award data to recipients' later educational and career outcomes.

5 Conclusion

The awards system of the Republic of Uzbekistan was founded on the 1995 Law "On State Awards" and consolidated by its 2018 new edition, which codified a hierarchy of 34 honorary titles, 11 orders and 4 medals and broadened the circle of nominating bodies. Since 2017, recognition policy has been extended to young people and women through the "Mard O‘g‘lon" State Award and the reformed Zulfiya State Prize, whose annual quota doubled from 14 to 28 and whose age range was widened to 14–30 years. A complete coding of the 140 "Mard O‘g‘lon" recipients for 2022–2026 shows that regional parity is strictly observed, that learners form the largest group of recipients (47.1%), and that the uniformed services reached their highest share (42.9%) in 2026. The open publication of named recipient lists is a substantive step toward a transparent awards system. Its legitimacy would be further strengthened by publishing the criteria, nomination statistics and evaluation procedures behind each list, so that state recognition is seen not only as public but also as fair and merit-based.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Y.D.M.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) for language editing, structural revision and assistance in locating and formatting references; Mendeley Reference Manager was used to manage citations. All AI-assisted output was reviewed, verified, and revised by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and final content of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The recipient lists analyzed in this study are publicly available on the official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (see the references). The coding sheet is available from the author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required because the study analyzes only publicly available official documents.

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