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Informal Welfare and Everyday Acts of Resistance to the State in Post-Soviet Central Asia. An Ethnographic Study of Mahalla Institutions in Rural Fergana, Uzbekistan

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INFORMAL WELFARE AND EVERYDAY ACTS OF
RESISTANCE TO THE STATE IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL
ASIA

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MAHALLA INSTITUTIONS IN
RURAL FERGANA, UZBEKISTAN

1. Introduction

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan, like other post-Soviet states, embarked on the highly complex task of building a new nation-state. After independence, coming on the heels of global (Western) neo-liberal discourse, Uzbekistan made all sorts of bold claims about its strong commitment to break the stranglehold of totalitarian forms of governance as well as its intention to introduce market economy reforms, which implied reduced role of the state in the economy and welfare provision. At the same time, Uzbek authorities were aware of the possible negative consequences of the rapid systemic change for political stability and therefore they adopted a piecemeal approach to policy changes. From the onset they made clear that Uzbekistan's governance model, whilst adhering to global neo-liberal trends, will be based on gradual reform strategy, thereby reckoning with its local socio-political context, economic situation, history, mentality, and centuries-old administrative traditions (Fumagalli 2007, Ruziev *et al.* 2007, Spechler 2008, Urinboyev 2013a, 2014). Seemingly, Uzbek authorities' reform choice was influenced largely by unstable political situation in Central Asia during the 1990s, e.g. ethnic clashes between the Uzbeks and the Meskhetian Turks in 1989, the Osh riots (ethnic conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan) in 1990, civil war in neighbouring Tajikistan in 1992–1997 (Warikoo and Norbu 1992, e.g. Fane 1996, Megoran 2007). Uzbekistan also had its own challenge coming as it did from radical Islamic movements in the Ferghana valley, traditionally the area for conservative Islam in Central Asia (Nunn *et al.* 1999, Melvin 2000, Naumkin 2005, Trisko 2005). In this regard, Uzbek authorities gradually and incrementally curtailed welfare support to the population, as they were aware of the risk that a rapid retrenchment of the

welfare state would affect the lives of millions, probably leading to social unrest (Spoor 1995, Pomfret 2000, Ruziev *et al.* 2007, Urinboyev 2013b). Hence, the social policy strategies of the Uzbek government in the 1990s clearly reflected the concerns for political stability.

The Soviet legacy also had a profound impact on social policies of the Uzbek government in the 1990s. Given the fact that the former Soviet social welfare system did provide relatively strong social protection and healthcare facilities, the general population of Uzbekistan were likely to expect the same treatment and conditions from the new Uzbek authorities. The Uzbek authorities were aware that they might lose legitimacy and face political instability if they failed to meet the expectations of the people. In the same vein, the main concern of the Uzbek authorities in the early years of independence was the prevention of dramatic output loss, strong social protection and modernisation of the economy by strengthening the industrial sector (Ruziev *et al.* 2007). As a result, the Uzbek authorities attempted to prevent social unrest and instability by devising social welfare policies targeted at the most needy population groups. The social welfare strategies adopted by the Uzbek authorities during the early years of independence were almost identical to the Soviet-era practices (Johnson 2007). Seemingly, the social protection policies of 1990s were primarily pursued with the aim of 'buying off' the sympathy of the people and maintaining political stability during the transition period.

However, the gradual reform strategy appeared to be a short-term remedy. Although the gradualist approach to transition contributed to a prevention of sharp output loss and consequential rise in unemployment and social unrest during the early years of transition, by 2000 it became evident that the economy was simply stagnating (Ruziev *et al.* 2007). As Kandiyoti (2007, p. 44) notes, the partial market reforms the government of Uzbekistan implemented in pursuit of stability paradoxically resulted in inefficient resource allocation and widespread corruption that required increased recourse to coercion. The implementation of market reforms was hampered by active government intervention in the economy and the use of administrative methods (Ergashev *et al.* 2006, p. 33), thereby creating significant administrative barriers and a high tax burden for national businesses. Consequently, high tax and regulatory burdens caused an increase in the informal economy, bringing additional pressure on public finances, resulting in higher tax rates, which again increased the incentives to evade taxes and to escape into the informal economy (Kandiyoti 2007, Ruziev *et al.* 2007).

These developments eventually led to a significant retrenchment of the

welfare state in Uzbekistan, since the tax revenue was very little compared to the scope of social welfare programmes promised by the government (Agadjanian and Makarova 2003, Micklewright and Marnie 2005, Kandiyoti 2007, Urinboyev 2011a, 2014). In the light of these challenges it seemed quite rational for Uzbek regime to capitalise on its existing (pre-Soviet) socially embedded governance structures as a means for maintaining decent level of welfare support to population (Urinboyev 2011a, 2011b, 2013b). Accordingly, mahalla¹, a pre-Soviet governance structure built on Islamic welfare values and traditions, presented itself as feasible and legitimate governance tool for 'outsourcing' the state's social service provision functions. As locally legitimate institutions, mahalla have been tasked with important social welfare functions throughout Uzbekistan. As David Abramson noted, „beginning in the late 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s, the Uzbek mahalla became the centrepiece of a state-sponsored campaign to transfer responsibilities for welfare and other social services onto local shoulders” (David M. Abramson, *Constructing Corruption*, supra note 109, as quoted in Sievers 2002, p. 144).

This event marked the beginning of 'mahalla-zation' of the state social welfare services in Uzbekistan that virtually absolved the state from its social welfare obligations, thereby placing all welfare obligations on the shoulders of mahalla structures. However, the devolution of social welfare functions to mahalla did not improve the quality of the public services for the population (Ilkhamov 2001, Kamp 2004, see e.g. Noori 2006a, Kandiyoti 2007). Rather, it worsened people's access to public services, since the state funds allocated to mahalla was meagre and mahalla committees simply could not meet the welfare needs of ordinary citizens. As a result, basic social welfare services that people have taken for granted during the Soviet era were no longer easily accessible and affordable. Many people had to invent informal ways of 'getting things done' and react to socio-economic hardships collectively, relying on mahalla-based informal social safety nets and income-generating activities. Thus, mahalla has become a 'hybrid' institution in the post-Soviet period, operating both on behalf of the formal PA system (formal mahalla) as well as functioning as community-driven informal welfare structure (informal mahalla). In this paper, I will refer to 'informal mahalla' when discussing (collective) mahalla-based informal social safety nets and income-generating

¹ Mahalla is an Arabic word meaning „local community” and alludes to a group of people residing in a specific territory (see Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). Although there are more than 12000 mahallas in Uzbekistan, but for the sake of simplicity I will use the word 'mahalla' in its singular form throughout the paper.

activities. The distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' mahalla will be demonstrated in the subsequent sections.

This paper aims to examine the processes and dynamics of the mahalla system and how it has evolved to respond to declining social welfare services in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, acting as an informal welfare structure given the failure of existing regime to address the structural inequalities and market defects during the transition period. It is argued that mahalla, a governance structure originating from Central Asia's Islamic past and administrative traditions, are now a key welfare structure that makes up for the incapacity of the state, offering alternative (to the state) forms of welfare support to the population. However, these developments have had far-reaching repercussions for state-society relations, state legitimacy and the political and social fabric of society in Uzbekistan. As the state retreated from its social welfare obligations, citizens are also retreating from their loyalty to the state by covertly and silently challenging the image, symbols and laws of the state and inventing informal means of 'getting things done'. In this paper, I suggest that citizens' collective, mahalla-based informal income-generating activities and pooling of efforts can be viewed as 'everyday acts of resistance to the state'. Even though the shrinkage of welfare state in Uzbekistan has not led to serious popular protests demanding the government to increase public social spending, it became an important avenue to a new form of community life and state-society relations. The effects of welfare policies are particularly felt in popular notions of entitlements and expectations. Due to the Soviet legacy, most Uzbeks view access to social services as a basic right, something that the state must provide for its citizens. In Uzbekistan, the formal state in this sense is 'dead', as the state no longer fulfils its social welfare obligations. In the light of declining social welfare services it could be inferred that the role and experience of the state in everyday lives is changing, as well as citizens' relations to laws and institutions of the state. These processes are visible in the way how people perceive and talk about the role of the state, what they classify as just and legitimate social order, tactics and coping strategies that they employ in order to 'get the things done' and moral frame into which they place these events, is instructive in helping us to understand the effects of post-Soviet welfare retrenchment on everyday life and socio-political fabric of society. Thus, this article explores 'the everyday forms of resistance to the state' that emerges within everyday mahalla life, as residents express their views and concerns about cutback of welfare support and engage in (informal) mahalla-based social safety nets.

These questions will be investigated with reference to relevant literature and the four periods of ethnographic field research conducted between 2009 and 2014 in the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan. The first field research was conducted during April-May 2009, the second field research lasted for three months between June-August 2010, the third was undertaken during June-July 2012 and the last field research was conducted between May-September 2014. The methods employed for data collection were participant observation and informal interviews.

The rest of the paper is organized in the following manner: The next section, part two, provides the brief historical overview of mahalla institution, depicting the processes and dynamics of its evolution during pre-Soviet (Islamic), Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Part three focuses on previous research that situates this study within 'Central Asian studies' and the 'mahalla' research and thereby presents an analytical framework for understanding the perspective I take on mahalla. In part four, I provide the theoretical framework of the study by utilising James Scott's notion of 'subtle forms of everyday resistance', Eugen Ehrlich's concept of 'living law' and Joel Migdal's 'the state-in-society' approach. In part five, I present the results of my ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2009-2014 in rural Ferghana, Uzbekistan, in which I explore mahalla as an informal welfare structure. Finally, part six draws out the implications of the ethnographic material for the broader scholarly debates on post-Soviet region and highlights the most important findings of the study.

2. What is Mahalla?

The role of mahalla as an administrative structure in the history of Central Asian societies has always been important. Following the collapse of Soviet Union there has been unrelenting interest in academic research and policy communities on the history of mahalla system (Abramson 1998, Geiss 2001, Sievers 2002, Human Rights Watch 2003, Massicard and Trevisani 2003, Kamp 2004, Micklewright and Marnie 2005, Masaru 2006, Noori 2006b, Urinboyev 2011a, 2011b, 2013b, 2014, Dadabaev 2013). Despite the existence of diversity of scholarly approaches to and explanations for mahalla, there is one common dilemma for the scholars studying mahalla. As Sievers (2002, 103–104) notes, this dilemma is due to the fact that 'mahalla are neither regionally uniform nor static, nor are the types of public goods available to mahalla residents'. Moreover, Sievers argues that mahalla have been changing

for centuries due to the establishment or collapse of empires and with the arrival of new ethnic groups or tribes. For Sievers, any depiction of mahalla in modern Uzbekistan should include some account of mahalla in the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods. Hence, before describing the role of mahalla in contemporary Uzbekistan, brief historical overview of pre-Soviet (Islamic) and Soviet mahalla may be in order.

2.1 Mahalla during Pre-Soviet (Islamic), Soviet and Post-Soviet period

Historically, Uzbek mahalla have been very successful in mobilizing resources and people. They were not governmental and their activities were non-profit. The origin of Mahalla tradition dates back to pre-Mongol period, around the 11th or 12th centuries when Islamic empires thrived in Central Asia (Sievers 2002). Pre-Soviet mahalla were usually a community of several hundred people, organized around Islamic rituals and social events. Some mahalla formed along ethnic, religious or professional lines (Abramson 1998, 27). Most mahalla possessed their own mosque, teahouse, bazaar and other facilities (Sievers 2002). The administration of pre-Soviet mahalla was fully based on Islamic values and traditions, since imam and the elders played a crucial role in the administration of mahalla by providing advice and direction to local community (Geiss 2001).

During the early Soviet period there were some attempts to eliminate the mahalla as an institution; but, later it became evident that such efforts would produce social unrest (Abramson 1998). As a result, Soviet government changed its strategy towards mahalla. Conversely, Soviet government tried to use mahalla for disseminating communist ideology by integrating them into the state and party structures (Rasanayagam 2011). As a result, mahalla served as local village councils during the Soviet period (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). However, in the final period of the Soviet Union mahalla ceased to disseminate communist ideology and returned to their traditional Islamic functions, running in parallel with government structures (Human Rights Watch 2003).

With the dawn of independent Uzbekistan in 1991, mahalla have become a buzzword in academic and policy debates. Almost all major public administration reforms touched on mahalla (Noori 2006b). Uzbek government has come to realize the significant role of mahalla in expanding the state's authority and implementing state social welfare policies (see e.g. Noori 2006a; Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001; Kamp 2004; Urinboyev 2013). Today there are about 12000 mahalla in Uzbekistan and each mahalla might contain

between 150 to 1500 households (Micklewright and Marnie 2005, 431). On average, approximately 400 households reside in one mahalla (*ibid.*). As Sievers (2002, 96) notes, everyone in Uzbekistan technically belongs to one mahalla. In other words, to be a citizen of Uzbekistan means to be a resident of a mahalla. For example, if a native is questioned where he or she lives, the answer will be 'I live in mahalla X' (Noori 2006a). Thus, mahalla binds people based on the principle of common residence in a certain neighborhood with established borders (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001). Although there are many definitions, in this paper mahalla is defined as a (residential) neighbourhood community in which residents are united by common traditions, language, customs, moral values, and reciprocal exchange of money, material goods and services.

2.2 'Formal' and 'Informal' Mahalla

Following the collapse of Soviet Union the nature and functions of mahalla system has changed drastically. This is because part of mahalla's informal functions have been formalised (through legislative codification and executive incorporation) and now mahalla activities are largely regulated by the state law. Before the advent of independence, the governance of mahalla was carried out according to Islamic values and traditions. Mahalla heavily relied on the authority of *imam* (religious leader) and *oqosoqol* (informal leader) to regulate the mahalla affairs and to enforce cooperative behaviour among the residents. However, the adoption of the *Law on Institutions of Self-Government of Citizens* in September 1993, and April 1999 (hereinafter Mahalla Law) has formalized the activities of mahalla, thereby indirectly incorporating it into the system of public administration. Thus, *mahalla* have come to signify an administrative institution.

However, despite the state's attempts to formalise and incorporate mahalla into the system of public administration, mahalla were able to preserve their traditional nature in which people are tied to each other and maintain everyday relations through common (Islamic) values, traditions, informal exchange and reciprocation of money, material goods and services (see e.g. Urinboyev 2011a, 2013b, 2014). Therefore, when discussing the effects of state's legal intervention on mahalla and the place of mahalla in Uzbekistan's future governance trajectories, there is a need to distinguish between 'formal' and 'informal' faces of the mahalla. This distinction is especially important when analysing the outcomes of previous research on mahalla, since much of the scholarly literature tends to overlook this important distinction. This paper

aims to contribute to these debates by empirically showing the informal aspects of mahalla where the state law is absent and residents cooperate via social norms in order to produce informal welfare system. Before embarking on this aim, I will briefly review the outcomes of previous research in the next section.

3. Previous Research on Mahalla

There has been a wide array of research on mahalla, investigating its historical context and transformation and the current role in different ways and for different reasons. The scholarly interest in mahalla is especially prevalent in the fields of social anthropology and political science where studies have empirically demonstrated the role of mahalla as ‘eyes and ears’ of the authoritarian regime in post-Soviet Uzbekistan (Abramson 1998, Kassymbekova 2003, Massicard and Trevisani 2003, Noori 2006b, Rasanayagam 2011). The bulk of these authors argue that the ruling regime in Uzbekistan deploys the mahalla and its leadership as a means to monitor and control the population and thereby tries to extend its authoritarian control through manipulating mahalla-based social control elements, such as locally rooted norms of authority, bonds of neighbourhood sociality, gossips, and informal information channels and networks of reciprocity and obligation.

Another account gleaned from scholarly literature examines mahalla from a social policy perspective, looking at mahalla’s role as distributor of state social welfare benefits (Atkinson and Micklewright 1992, Falkingham *et al.* 1997, Coudouel *et al.* 1998, Coudouel and Marnie 1999, Sievers 2002, Kamp 2004, Micklewright and Marnie 2005). The central idea common to this entire body of literature is that they are concerned with the question of whether or not mahalla-based targeting of social welfare benefits is efficient and helps reduce poverty in Uzbekistan. Some of these studies critically examine the fairness/justness of mahalla-based targeting through women’s rights perspective, arguing that mahalla as a patriarchal social structure is oppressive social policy instrument in relation the needs of women and thereby leads to the abuse of women rights (Kamp 2004; Human Rights Watch 2003). There is also penchant to examine mahalla as a local form of civil society in Uzbekistan (Clarke 1999, Sievers 2002, Massicard and Trevisani 2003, Masaru 2006). These studies describe mahalla as a ‘socio-political object’ that are able to offer a local understanding of the relationship between state and society.

As the review of previous research indicates, current scholarly under-

standings of mahalla institutions in Uzbekistan continue to be based on the analysis of 'formal' mahalla system (which is regulated by Mahalla Law) that make it difficult to recognise the dynamics of mahalla and its resistance to the state's legal intervention. This means the state in Uzbekistan is still portrayed as an omnipresent actor that is capable of penetrating deeply into the fabrics of everyday life. The state is certainly a powerful actor when it comes to using coercion and regulating the activities of 'formal' mahalla. However, the state and its coercive structures are almost invisible in terms of influencing socio-economic relations and negotiations on the level of informal mahalla. My ethnographic fieldwork conducted in rural Ferghana tells us that the findings of previous research on mahalla needs to be reconsidered in the light of empirical evidence. As a result of Uzbek authorities' attempts to formalise the mahalla by devolving extensive administrative responsibilities, mahalla has become a 'hybrid' institution, operating both on behalf of the formal public administration system (formal mahalla) as well as functioning as community-driven informal welfare structure with its own normative system, which is based on Islamic welfare values (informal mahalla). The spatial boundary between formal and informal mahalla is blurred, as we can observe the coexistence and clash of the two parallel socio-political and socio-legal environments in the same mahalla. Nevertheless, as I argued in my previous article (Urinboyev 2011a), one can distinguish between 'formal' and 'informal' mahalla by looking at their regulatory structures: the former is administered by the Mahalla Law, whereas the latter is built on Islamic welfare values, customs and traditions. This distinction will be empirically demonstrated in the next sections.

4. Theoretical Framework

As I argued in the previous sections, in post-Soviet Uzbekistan and possibly other post-Soviet societies, the discourse of welfare is one of the key arenas where the state, as well as the notion of 'social contract' between the state and citizens is imagined and constructed. Although the decline of welfare state in Uzbekistan has not resulted in overt forms of resistance, it has become an important avenue to silent everyday forms of resistance to the state. Given that the costs of displaying overt challenge to the state is high, ordinary citizens are expressing covert forms of resistance to the state, i.e. engaging in collective action by developing mahalla-based alternative (to the state) redistributive, risk-stretching and income-generating activities. Such forms of collective

citizen response reminds us of the 'subtle forms of everyday resistance' that James Scott (1985) described in his book, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. For Scott, the resistance is manifested not only in visible historic events such as organized rebellions or collective action, but can also be observed in subtle but powerful forms of „everyday resistance” (e.g. foot dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage) in which both individuals and groups resist without directly confronting or challenging dominant norms (*ibid.*). Scott's idea of peasant resistance can be compared to how citizens in Uzbekistan talk about the role of the state, what they classify as just and legitimate social order, tactics and coping strategies that they employ in order to meet their livelihood needs and moral frame into which they place these events. Hence, the subtle forms of everyday resistance to the state also occur when citizens produce informal welfare structures as a reaction to the absence of protective welfare state.

There is strong support for Scott's perspective in the field of political science where Joel S. Migdal (1994) argued that the society consists of numerous social organisations (forces), the state being one of them. For Migdal, the patterns of domination in society are mainly determined by key struggles spread through what he calls 'society's multiple arenas of domination and opposition'. The state, as one of the organisations in society, is subject to the 'pushes and pulls' in society's arenas, facing enormous resistance from social forces that promote different versions of how people should behave (*ibid.*). Also, Eugen Ehrlich's concept of 'living law', and his description of the coexistence and clashes of the state law and informal norms produced by non-state social associations (living law), are comparable to the ideas of Scott and Migdal (see e.g. Urinboyev and Svensson 2013a, 2013b, 2014). In *Fundamental Principles of the Sociology of Law*, Ehrlich (2002) argues that it is not the state law, but it is actually the 'living law' that dominates everyday life itself, even though it has not been posited in legal propositions. Ehrlich advises that if we want to better understand the coexistence and clashes (resistance) of different normative orders in society, we should attentively observe everyday life, relations of domination, actual habits of people, and inquire into people's thoughts on the opinions of relevant people in their surrounding environment, and on proper social behavior (*ibid.*).

Thus, equipped with the aforementioned theoretical framework, one possible inference is that citizens' collective reaction (informal welfare) to the erosion of welfare services may be viewed as 'everyday acts of resistance to the state' in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

5. Mahalla as an Informal Welfare Structure in Rural Ferghana

In this section I describe the extent to which the mahalla-based pooling of efforts has become a truly genuine form of substitute for the public goods, services and social protection system provided by the state. My intention is that by looking closely at mahalla-based informal economic practices we may get a clue to everyday life and socio-political changes in rural communities, how people view the role of the state, how they talk about the cutback of state social support, the tactics and coping strategies that they invent to make up for the shortage of state social support and the moral frame into which they place these events. In doing so, the aim is to better delineate citizens collective but silent protest against the worsening of state social services in post-Soviet period as well as to reveal the indiscernible social changes that are taking place in rural communities due to the absence of protective welfare state.

The province of Ferghana, where I conducted my field research, is one of the regions of Uzbekistan where the struggle for survival is the highest due to population density and where rural unemployment has been reported as a problem for a long time (Lubin 1984, Broxup 1990, Dankov 2007, Starr *et al.* 2011). Moreover, Ferghana valley is also perceived as one of the most religious areas in Central Asia where Islamic values and principles enjoy wide popularity among ordinary people (Nunn *et al.* 1999, Khalid 2003, 2014, Zanca 2004, Rasanayagam 2011, Urinboyev 2013b). *Shabboda* village², from which this mahalla case study is drawn, is a village in rural Ferghana, consisting of 28 mahalla, and has a population of more than 18,000 people. While doing fieldwork in several mahalla of this village, I was struck by how households have become increasingly dependent on the mahalla-based informal economic activities for meeting their livelihood needs, and how Islamic values and norms provide moral framework for cooperation and solidarity among residents. The *hashar* tradition is one manifestation of such mahalla-based coping strategies where mahalla residents see their free, non-compensated work as being good Muslim, and thereby co-operate with each other by reciprocally exchanging labour, money, material goods and services. Income-generating activities of the mahalla residents are made up of multiple sources, ranging from cucumber and grape production, remittances sent from Russia, wedding logistics work, to construction work, fruit picking jobs and brokerage. However, all of these mahalla-based pooling of efforts and income-generating activities are informal in the sense that they are neither registered in the local government records

² The name of the village has been changed to protect the anonymity of the informants.

nor are regulated by labour laws. Even employed people are compelled to supplement their income with alternative sources of income, since salaries from state jobs are not sufficient to secure basic needs.

An account of the collective efforts of mahalla residents to distribute the livelihood risks within the community is illustrative of the 'resistance' nature of the informal economic activities, and how Islam-laden moral codes have become dominant normative order in everyday mahalla life vis-a-vis the state law. In rural Ferghana, the word '*hashar*' is generally used to refer to a non-compensated community project in which mahalla residents co-operate with one another by reciprocal exchange of labour, money, material goods and services. During my fieldwork I observed that mahalla residents arranged a *hashar* for a variety of reasons, for example, the construction of irrigation facilities, street cleaning, asphaltting of roads, the construction of dwellings or mosques, the organisation of wedding, funerals and circumcision feasts, and many other services not provided by the state. The informal leader of mahalla, *oqsoqol* I interviewed said that post-Soviet economic decline has considerably increased the role of *hashar* in everyday life, because mahalla residents build irrigation facilities and asphalt mahalla roads through *hashar*. To illustrate the role of *hashar* in everyday life, I present some empirical evidence below, dealing with the most pressing issues in rural Ferghana: the construction of irrigation facilities and asphaltting of mahalla roads.

Since agricultural production is an important source of income in rural Ferghana, one of the main concerns of mahalla residents had to do with water and irrigation facilities. During the Soviet era local government and collective farms (*kolkhoz*) took charge of irrigation issues. But the local government in post-independence Uzbekistan did not have any centrally allocated funding to build and maintain irrigation facilities, such as drainage, to secure farmers' as well as ordinary citizens access to water during the agricultural season. As a result, the local government exercised full control over water and irrigation facilities and utilised the existing water and irrigation facilities for cotton and wheat production, thereby effectively leaving ordinary people without access to water. In this regard, one of the biggest mahalla-based pooling of efforts (*hashar*) in *Shabboda* village that I observed dealt with building an irrigation system. The *oqsoqol* of the mahalla collected contributions from each household in the mahalla. Wealthy households made bigger monetary contributions than other households, while those with limited financial means contributed with their labour. Mahalla residents also met the electricity costs of the drainage. Nevertheless, despite the mahalla-based efforts, the money

collected for building the irrigation system was far from being sufficient. There were several rich families in mahalla, however, only one of them, *Aziz hoji*³ decided to provide full funding for irrigation. When I interviewed him, *Aziz hoji* explained his decision to finance the irrigation with reference to Islamic principles. As he states, his assistance to mahalla is driven by his belief that the one who provides water to people would definitely go to *jannat* (paradise) after the death. The case of *Aziz hoji* is illustrative of the hidden role of Islam as normative force in Uzbekistan where Islam is incorporated not only in the posture of prayers and patterns of ritual intonation, but in the daily flow of mahalla life. These findings are also consistent with the common interpretation by social scientists studying Muslim societies who argue that that everyday interaction is given moral significance when placed within an Islamic frame (Lambek 1993, Rasanayagam 2011). As I have been observing everyday social interactions in this mahalla for the last five years (2009-2014), I came to realise that residents with good knowledge of *Qur'on* (the sacred text of Islam) and Sharia law enjoyed the status of 'elite' in mahalla and were often behind the important decisions related to mahalla administration. This situation is somewhat paradoxical given the zeal of Uzbek authorities to prevent the rise of Islam as a parallel social order and maintain secularism in everyday life.

Another relevant example is a road-asphalting project in one of the mahalla in *Shabboda* village where residents succeeded in asphaltting the roads of mahalla without any financial assistance or supervision from the local government. I was struck by how mahalla residents were able to collectively implement such an expensive project, while the irrigation and road construction issues are mainly placed in the hands of specialised state agencies in Western countries. This time again the large part of the asphaltting expenses was covered by wealthy mahalla residents who decided to finance it believing that their donation to such projects would give them more *savob* (*spiritual merit*) and thereby make them better Muslims. Hence, Islamic values and principles create a solid moral framework in mahalla life and everyday social relations in rural Ferghana where people's social status and 'being good Muslim' is determined by their contribution to mahalla projects. Hence, while attending mosque gatherings and mahalla *choyhona* (teahouse) I noticed that the donation activities of mahalla's wealthy residents were regarded as 'acts of piety and charity' and those who donated more than others enjoyed high prestige in mahalla. As I encountered in the words of mahalla residents, giving

³ Hoji is a holy title which is given to a Muslim person who has successfully completed the hajj to Mecca.

zakat (monetary assistance to poor families) and *ushr* (income tax) to needy families was important symbol of 'a good Muslim' in rural Ferghana. Johan Rasanayagam, in his recent book 'Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan', also demonstrated that the sense of being 'good Muslim' is not solely interior and personal, but also produced and expressed in action and in relations with others (Rasanayagam 2011, 19). Studies show that the similar patterns of Islam-driven charity activities can be observed in other parts of Uzbekistan as well. Based on her extensive anthropological fieldwork in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, Maria Louw (2007) shows that Islam is an important marker for identity, a good ground for morality and a tool for everyday problem solving in the economically harsh, socially insecure and politically tense atmosphere of present-day Uzbekistan. In this regard, Islam, both as a religion and normative structure, provides moral framework in everyday mahalla relations, encouraging people to engage in the acts of piety and charity and catering each other's needs in times of economic hardships. The everyday experiences I encountered in rural Ferghana was one evidence of Islam's role as a governance structure guiding welfare activities and social relations in mahalla, whereas the laws and policies of the state were almost imperceptible in everyday life.

During the field research I also gained important insights about the local moral codes (living law) that promote alternative (to the state law) versions of how state officials should behave and fulfil their duties. In this connection, I was particularly interested in two mahalla residents, *Sardor* and *Rahmon*, who were both state officials and the centre of 'everyday mahalla talk'. *Sardor* was a very high-level state official and worked as the deputy chief of Ferghana region police, whereas *Rahmon* was a district level traffic policeman (a low-level official). However, in the everyday mahalla life, *Sardor*, despite having such a high official status, did not have decent reputation and was often described as 'communist', the term that carries negative meaning and is used in relation to law-abiding state officials who do not share their political influence and resources with their kin and mahalla. As a high-level police official, *Sardor* had an enormous power and he could easily divert the resources to mahalla, but he always rejected the requests of mahalla and asked them to solve their problems through formal channels. Because of his attempts to keep his public office separate from private sphere, *Sardor* was regarded as 'communist' in the words of many mahalla residents we encountered. On the other hand, low-level official *Rahmon* was a 'man of respect' and enjoyed very high social status and reputation in mahalla. Unlike *Sardor*, *Rahmon* provided patronage to mahalla residents, for instance by diverting the resources of the state to his mahalla and

helping mahalla residents to avoid or manoeuvre around the state law. *Rahmon* was especially praised for his ability to act as a bridge between high level state officials and ordinary residents in terms of negotiating the amount of informal payment for job or university admission issues, and bending state laws to meet the interests of mahalla residents. Therefore, when invited to weddings, *Rahmon* was always offered a 'best table' and served more quickly than others. Thus, according to mahalla's moral codes (living law), *Sardor* was neither good person nor good state official due to his law-abiding behaviour and unwillingness to help mahalla people, while *Rahmon* was the 'pride of mahalla', due to his sensitivity to the needs and concerns of mahalla.

The example of these two state officials shows that the state officials in rural Ferghana are torn between loyalty to their family and mahalla networks, and honesty at work. Therefore, maintaining loyalty and respect for such networks often comes at the expense of formal structures, thereby leading to an omnipresence of informal practices in formal arenas. The tactics and coping strategies that mahalla residents employ in order to 'co-opt' state officials are the expressions of 'everyday acts of resistance to the state', since people have developed 'living law' that demand the state officials to serve their mahalla needs rather than to follow their work ethics and laws of the state. This is a collective action that creates informal norms to which state officials should conform. This indicates that behavioural instructions (living law) promoted by informal mahalla influence the implementation of state laws and regulations. Although the 'living law' described here may seem illicit or abnormal, it is however accepted within rural communities in Ferghana as legitimate coping strategy— regardless of whether they are licit or illicit.

From my observations in rural Ferghana I have also learned that most foreign businesses of Uzbekistan are carried out by a local mahalla-based group of traders and entrepreneurs. The local population calls these groups *rossiychilar* – a group of traders that export Uzbek agricultural products to Russia. These groups mainly buy agricultural products (e.g. cucumbers, grapes, peaches, apples) from mahalla residents and export them to Russia. Since the price of agricultural products is quite low on the local market, all mahalla residents try to sell their agricultural products to the *rossiychilar*. Although the economic size of these mahalla-based transactions are quite large, these transactions are carried out through unwritten rules and giving your word counts more than written laws. People and *rossiychilar* often refer to Islamic terms such as *insaf* (justice) and *halal* when negotiating the price of agricultural products. Since the relations between trading parties are based on Islamic principles, the

chances of dishonesty is quite low as the party who deviates from the trade deal is regarded as 'bad Muslim' and is therefore subject to mahalla gossip. Many of those I encountered during the fieldwork reported that the co-operation between the mahalla residents and the *rossiychilar* resulted in significant improvements in the standard of living in rural Ferghana. What makes the case of *rossiychilar* relevant is that *rossiychilar* were also heavily involved in the acts of piety and charity through giving *zakat* and *ushr* from their yearly income. While observing everyday life in *Shabboda* village I was often part of mahalla discussions about people's *zakat* and *ushr* activities. These examples show that the main social policy pillars of Islam, such as *zakat* and *ushr*, surprisingly survived long decades of Soviet atheism policy and still continues as essential feature of everyday social relations in rural Ferghana. One important perspective I gained from my fieldwork is that Islam's role as moral and social force was quite obvious in rural Ferghana, despite Uzbek regime's zeal to secularise the rural areas of Uzbekistan. In this respect the coping strategies and (Islamic) moral codes promoted by informal mahalla can be considered as the everyday acts of resistance to state, albeit covert and silent, which indicates the resilience of Islamic legal culture in Uzbekistan.

While mahalla was the main shock-absorbing structure, the image and role of the local government in rural Ferghana was almost invisible. The formal mahalla leader, *rais*, was also non-existent during mahalla negotiations over irrigation and asphaltting projects. When I asked mahalla residents what role the local government plays in financing mahalla-based projects, their answers were very anecdotal. As one mahalla resident explained, mahalla-financed projects, such as the asphaltting of roads and irrigation building, usually appear in the official records of the local government as state-funded projects, and the local government officials report them to the central government as the local government project. Hence, these observations show that the mahalla has become a truly genuine self-help organisation in rural Ferghana, while the state and its institutions are imperceptible in everyday life. This perspective is also reinforced by Aminova and Jegers's (2011) study on informal structures and governance processes in Uzbekistan. As Aminova and Jegers (2011) show, due to the inability of formal structures to adequately respond to the realities of transition to a market economy, the existing informal structures, socio-cultural mechanisms, and cultural artifacts took the lead and filled the emerging vacuum in the areas where formal mechanisms were weakened, non-existent, or only emerging.

Due to a Soviet legacy many people I encountered in rural Fergana had high

expectations from the state in terms of welfare support. Despite the despotic and corrupt nature of the Soviet system the majority of people in rural Fergana I interviewed - especially the older generation - expressed nostalgia for the former Soviet Union. They frequently mentioned the availability of inexpensive food, jobs, healthcare, affordable housing, and education during the Soviet era. Many people I met in *Shabboda* village voiced their strong dissatisfaction with the state's economic and social policies, mentioning excessive declines in social services, a high unemployment rate, interference of tax officials in informal income earning opportunities, high custom duties and tightened border controls. When I asked one of the mahalla residents how he perceived the role of the state in everyday life, his answer was quite surprising. Referring to the state's inability to provide even basic needs such as affordable healthcare, he said that '*The state died shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union*'. Hence, when talking with ordinary people in *Shabboda* village, I felt that the ruling elites' narrative of the 'great future' is losing its credibility in light of these problems. The role of the mahalla as a shock-absorbing structure was being strengthened while the state was almost invisible in everyday life within the local communities in Fergana. Therefore, it is not surprising that the state in Uzbekistan is weak in terms of 'rule of law' and cannot even enforce existing laws. Even though the state in Uzbekistan may appear to be omnipotent due to its infrastructural and coercive capacity, as our results show, it has very little meaning in everyday life at the local level. When observing local level interactions in Uzbekistan, it becomes difficult to experience the state or its laws as an ontically coherent entity: What one confronts instead is an enormous degree of informal exchange and reciprocation of money, material goods and services that are carried out through non-codified, but socially reproduced informal rules – 'living law'. From this perspective, the apparent proliferation of informal welfare system might be viewed as a resistance to the state's inability to secure the basic needs of its citizens.

6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

My ethnographic data show that the informal mahalla serves as a 'palliative' mechanism, making up for the incapacity of the state that fails to secure the basic needs of citizens. While the state has not been able to secure the basic needs of its citizens, the mahalla-based informal economic practices have become an alternative coping strategy in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Although

Uzbekistan inherited the infrastructures of welfare state after the Soviet collapse, it did not have enough funding to run the system. As a result, the people of Uzbekistan have created alternative informal ways to meet their livelihood needs, as I described in the previous section. These mahalla-based economic practices could thus be regarded as 'informal welfare system, as this is the system in place that helps people 'get the things done'. Another equally how ordinary mahalla residents responded to cutback of welfare services by favouring Islamic values and principles vis-a-vis the state law. Since the state do not provide the welfare 'from cradle to grave', the ordinary citizens do not feel any moral obligation to follow the laws of the state. The reasoning of most of the people I interviewed during my fieldwork was based on Islamic values whereas the laws and symbols of the state were virtually absent in the everyday mahalla talk. Mahalla residents often stated that every Muslim is expected to share his or her economic resources with relatives and neighbours. As my informants explained, this is a pre-condition to be a 'good Muslim'. Therefore, despite the relentless attempts of Uzbek authorities to limit the role of Islam as a social force in everyday life, informal mahalla continues to function along Islamic values and rituals, serving as an informal social safety net.

In post-Soviet Uzbekistan, citizens' 'resistance to the state' emerges through the daily flow of (mahalla) informal norms and expectations, moral values, traditions and reciprocal exchanges. The 'everyday acts of resistance to the state' can be seen by observing everyday social interactions, how people behave in mahalla, people's coping strategies and how people 'get things done'. More specifically, the patterns of the 'everyday acts of resistance to the state' can be gleaned by looking at the following indicators:

- (a) Citizens' moral reasoning about the lack of welfare support and the comparisons that they often make between the Soviet and post-Soviet times;
- (b) Apparent reinvigoration and strengthening of Islamic welfare values and moral codes vis-a-vis the laws and symbols of the state;
- (c) The informal mahalla's attempts to co-opt state officials to serve the interests of mahalla via social pressures and norms ('living law').

As the findings demonstrate, when coping strategies are based on informal rules, the laws and regulations of the state gain a secondary character, and the 'living law' that regulates informal relations becomes a parallel system of governance. Although this parallel system does not overtly challenge both the real and symbolic order of the state, it becomes an omnipresent phenomenon and thereby unofficially reshapes central policies, especially when not tailored to context and place. One possible inference is that these informal economic

practices and coping strategies can be regarded as 'everyday forms of resistance' in the sense that they manifest the failure of the state to meet the basic needs of citizens, and therefore do constitute a form of reproduction of political and social order by the population that feel excluded from the access to welfare services. In this regard, informal economic practices can be seen as people's silent but desperate reaction to state failure. However, informal economic practices provide a short-term solution to structural inequalities and national (socio-economic) threats. They also modify the state-society relations in the long-term, thereby weakening the legitimacy of the state. Consequently, informal welfare system cannot address the large-scale problems, and thus there is a need to 'bring the state back' by initiating more inclusive and encompassing welfare reforms.

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