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Social Media, Anti-Corruption Activism and Democratisation in Authoritarian Contexts: A Case Study of Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article aims to examine the nexus between social media, anti-corruption activism and democratisation in authoritarian regime contexts. It will investigate the complex ways in which civil society actors utilise art and humour on social media platforms to engage in covert anti-corruption activism. In doing so, we will show how, in authoritarian contexts, digital (social media) activists creatively navigate the constraints under the conditions of authoritarianism while seeking to address issues of corruption and government inefficiencies. This inquiry is timely given the global surge in authoritarianism. The study focuses on Uzbekistan, exemplifying the challenges of transitioning from repressive to softer authoritarianism while grappling with corruption and limited media freedom. Insights from this analysis offer valuable perspectives on civil society resilience, technology's role, and the pursuit of transparency in non-democratic settings.

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Introduction

During our ethnographic fieldwork in Tashkent in July 2023, we invited three local social media activists, commonly referred to as bloggers, for a meal at a *choykhona* (teahouse). As choykhonas in Uzbekistan serve not only as places for food and socializing but also as hubs for discussing and debating political matters, we engaged in a conversation about the current developments and changing political situation in Uzbekistan. One of the bloggers, reflecting on his experiences as a social media activist, shared an anecdote that subtly hinted at the state of media freedom in the country:

> During the era of President Islam Karimov (1991-2016), there was a member (deputy) of the Uzbek Parliament (Oliy Majlis), known for his devout religious practices and distinctive attire. Despite the unwelcoming environment for overt displays of religiosity, he persisted in his observance. One day, this official was arrested on fabricated charges and sentenced to five years in the notorious Jaslyk detention facility in Karakalpakstan, where torture was widespread. News of the imprisoned official reached President Karimov, who was infuriated by the detention of a Parliament deputy, a high-ranking official with immunity. Karimov summoned the General Prosecutor and demanded an explanation. The General Prosecutor, aware of Karimov's intolerance toward religion, suggested that the official's religious inclinations posed a risk of radicalisation, justifying the imprisonment to maintain political and social stability. Upon learning of the official's devout religious practices, Karimov ordered the prison sentence extended to ten years. With the onset of Shavkat Mirziyoyev's presidency after Karimov's death in 2016, the government's focus shifted. Religious radicals and political Islam were no longer the primary targets of Uzbek law enforcement agencies. Instead, bloggers found themselves in the crosshairs. Even when state officials were caught embezzling millions from the state budget, they typically received sentences of up to five years. In contrast, bloggers, often accused of minor offences like swindling and fraud, faced sentences of

>up to ten years. Thus, bloggers, not religious radicals
>or kleptocratic officials, became the perceived "main
>threat" to political and social stability in Uzbekistan.

The last phrase was accompanied by a wry laugh, reflecting a sense of irony, cynicism and sadness of the situation that many bloggers in Uzbekistan found themselves in. This anecdote, regardless of whether it is based on a real event or an imagined situation, gives us a clue to the opaque environment under which social media activists and investigative journalists operate in the country. The anecdote also fits the worrisome reports of the human rights watchdogs, civil society organizations and international media on the deterioration of human rights and media freedom situation in Uzbekistan.[1] While Uzbekistan has experienced positive changes in media freedom and political liberalization, recent developments indicate a concerning backslide towards repression.

Given the worsening situation around media freedom, many bloggers, already cautious about the limits of freedom of speech, have started to censor themselves even more.[2] These tendencies are particularly visible when observing the content they create and disseminate on their social media pages. However, despite the intimidation and fear of government persecution, many bloggers continue to engage in criticizing corruption and government inefficiencies by deploying covert but creative strategies. Such covert practices include the critical discussion of current developments in Uzbekistan through the use of art and humour on social media platforms. The analysis of these processes thus raises intriguing questions of how social media activists use art and humour to resist government inefficiencies and combat corrupt practices in authoritarian contexts like Uzbekistan. What are the underlying dynamics that shape the interactions between these actors and both state and non-state institutions, particularly within the digital space? To what extent does the utilisation of social media platforms as tools of resistance by social media activists contribute to empowering citizens to challenge corruption narratives and influencing the trajectory of political change in authoritarian contexts? This study seeks to address these questions.

Based on the above considerations, the article aims to examine the nexus between social media, anti-corruption activism and democratisation in Uzbekistan. More specifically, it will investigate the complex ways in

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[1]Pannier, B., 2023. The Uzbek President's Broken Promises On Media Freedom [online]. https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-media-broken-promises/32495520.html; Human Rights Watch, 2024. Country Report: Uzbekistan. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/uzbekistan

[2] In 2023, several bloggers and independent journalists in Uzbekistan declared they would stop their work due to mounting pressure from law enforcement bodies; https://www.gazeta.uz/uz/2023/06/05/tugatildi/

which civil society actors utilise art and humour on social media platforms to engage in covert anti-corruption activism. In doing so, we will show how, in authoritarian contexts like Uzbekistan, digital (social media) activists are compelled to operate within constrained spaces while seeking to address issues of corruption and government inefficiencies. We argue that understanding the strategies they employ to circumvent restrictions and effect change is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of state-society interactions and their potential impact on the democratisation process.

Addressing the aforesaid research aim and questions is timely given the ever-growing number of authoritarian regimes over the last three decades, a global trend frequently referred to as a crisis of democracy[3] or "authoritarianism goes global."[4] The initial euphoria that accompanied the spread of democratic ideals in the 1990s has been tempered by the rise of authoritarian governments across different parts of the world.[5] From this perspective, traditional anti-corruption frameworks (e.g., the principal-agent model) and conventional notions of civil society developed in Western liberal democratic contexts have limited utility in the context of authoritarian regimes. In authoritarian contexts, where power is concentrated within a limited elite and checks and balances are often weak, corruption can flourish unchecked.[6] The lack of robust democratic institutions and independent media exacerbates the problem, enabling corrupt practices to infiltrate various facets of society. State capture by vested interests, cronyism, and a lack of accountability mechanisms contribute to the entrenchment of corruption at both the higher echelons of power and grassroots levels. The challenge of combating corruption is further complicated in contexts where dissent and civic activism are suppressed.

[3] Freedom House. 2022. 'The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule'. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule, accessed September 5, 2023; Adam Przeworski. 2019. *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

[4] Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2016).

[5] Freedom House, 'The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule', 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule, accessed September 5, 2023.the enemies of liberal democracy—a form of self-government in which human rights are recognized and every individual is entitled to equal treatment under law—are accelerating their attacks.","language":"en","title":"The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule","URL":"https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule","author":[{"family":"Freedom House","given":""}],"accessed":{"date-parts":[["2023",1,9]]},"issued":{"date-parts":[["2022"]]}}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}

[6] Noah Buckley-Farlee. 2017. "Calculating Corruption: Political Competition and Bribery under Authoritarianism." Ph.D. Dissertation, New York: Columbia University; Stefan Roberto Foa. 2018. "Modernization and Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 29 (3): 129–40; Marina Zaloznaya. 2015. "Does Authoritarianism Breed Corruption? Reconsidering the Relationship Between Authoritarian Governance and Corrupt Exchanges in Bureaucracies." *Law & Social Inquiry* 40 (2): 345–76.

Authoritarian regimes frequently curtail freedom of expression, associa-
tion, and assembly, making it difficult for citizens to hold those in power
accountable. Civil society organisations, which often play a crucial role
in promoting transparency and accountability, may face restrictions that
hinder their ability to effectively challenge corrupt practices.

In exploring the research aim and questions outlined above, this
article analyses online, informal and covert civil society initiatives in a
post-Soviet country, namely Uzbekistan. The country exemplifies the
complexities of transitioning from heavily repressive to relatively softer
forms of authoritarianism.[7] The prevalence of corruption further exacer-
bates governance challenges, as indicated by its ranking on the Corruption
Perceptions Index.[8] In terms of free and independent media, journalists
in Uzbekistan still face significant hurdles, and the government tightly
controls and monitors the flow of information. With modest improve-
ments in recent years, the country still scores very low on the World Press
Freedom Index, ranking 148 out of 180 countries.[9] The Uzbek government
closely monitors social media and punishes active critics of the regime
(cyberbullying through trolls, fabricated charges, etc.), allowing only
innocuous and limited criticism at lower levels of government officials.[10]
Authorities regularly block access to critical news websites or particular
social media platforms, as in the case of Twitter, which was only unblocked
in August 2022 after more than a year of blocking. This "soft authoritar-
ian tool kit"[11] allows the Uzbek government to tightly control the flow of
information and mitigate the potential of any social unrest.

Accordingly, studying anti-corruption efforts within Uzbekistan's
authoritarian context is significant for several reasons. First, it sheds light
on the resilience and adaptability of civil society actors who navigate the
limitations imposed by the state. By exploring the strategies that allow
them to express dissent and critique through covert means on social media,
this research offers insights into how civil society operates in non-demo-
cratic settings. Second, the examination of digital activists' use of social

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[7] Luca Anceschi. 2018. "Modernising Authoritarianism in Uzbekistan." *OpenDemocracy*
(blog). https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/modernising-authoritarianism-in-uzbeki-
stan/; Neil Buckley. 2018. "Once-Repressive Uzbekistan Begins a Post-Karimov Opening."
Financial Times. February 13, 2018. https://www.ft.com/content/6c37419c-0cbf-11e8-8eb7-
42f857ea9f09, accessed September 5, 2023.

[8] Transparency International. Corruption Perception Index 2022. https://www.transparency.
org/en/countries/uzbekistan

[9] Reporters Without Borders. World Freedom Index 2024. The country ranked 137/180 in
2023, with significant decrease in 2024. https://rsf.org/en/index

[10] Steve Swerdlow. 2018. "You Can't See Them, but They're Always There": Censorship
and Freedom of the Media in Uzbekistan. HRW, https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/03/28/
you-cant-see-them-theyre-always-there/censorship-and-freedom-media-uzbekistan

[11] Edward Schatz. 2009. The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-setting Power in Kazakh-
stan and Kyrgyzstan. *Comparative Politics* 41: 2: 202-222.

media platforms as tools of resistance provides valuable insights into the potential role of technology in shaping political narratives and challenging authoritarian tendencies. Third, a nuanced understanding of anti-corruption initiatives in Uzbekistan can contribute to broader discussions about the role of civil society in promoting governance accountability and transparency in authoritarian regimes.

By delving into the intricacies of anti-corruption efforts in Uzbekistan, this article aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on civil society-state dynamics and the role of social media within non-democratic regimes. The case of Uzbekistan offers a compelling backdrop for investigating the ways in which civil society actors and digital activists operate in the face of limited political freedoms, ultimately providing insights into the potential for change and the challenges that persist within such environments.

The Social Media and Democratisation Nexus

There has been a proliferation of literature on the effect of social media on democracy promotion.[12] However, whether social media can facilitate democratisation or bolster authoritarianism is not yet settled among scholars, as both camps provide empirical evidence supporting their argument. Optimists praised the role of social media for its ability to "create new relational spaces, or online collectives,"[13] "facilitate collective action,"[14] "express collective identity,"[15] and "influence government policies and/ or public opinion."[16] As digital media technologies proliferated and led to regime changes in the early 2010s, some assumed that social media could bring pro-democracy social and political change in authoritarian contexts.[17]

On the other hand, other studies warn us that while social media can generate and maintain mobilisation, this does not often translate from online discussions to offline actions.[18] Moreover, just as new digital

[12] Manuel Castells, *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004); R. Kelly Garrett, 'Protest in an Information Society: A Review of Literature on Social Movements and New ICTs', *Information, Communication & Society* 9, no. 02 (2006): 202–24; Lauren Langman, 'From Virtual Public Spheres to Global Justice: A Critical Theory of Internetworked Social Movements', *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 1 (2005): 42–74.
[13] Sonia Núñez Puente, 'Feminist Cyberactivism: Violence against Women, Internet Politics, and Spanish Feminist Praxis Online', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25, no. 03 (2011): 333.
[14] Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 'The Labors of Internet-Assisted Activism: Overcommunication, Miscommunication, and Communicative Overload', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 6, no. 3–4 (2009): 267.
[15] Melissa A. Wall, 'Social Movements and Email: Expressions of Online Identity in the Globalization Protests', *New Media & Society* 9, no. 2 (2007): 268.
[16] Stephen Marmura, 'A Net Advantage? The Internet, Grassroots Activism and American Middle-Eastern Policy', *New Media & Society* 10, no. 2 (2008): 268.
[17] John Postill, 'The Rise of Nerd Politics', *London: Pluto*, 2018.
[18] Anastasia Denisova, 'Democracy, Protest and Public Sphere in Russia after the 2011–2012

platforms provide opportunities to digital activists, they also provide opportunities for autocrats. In particular, social media activists face three main challenges from authoritarian regimes in their activities: repression, state monitoring, and censorship.[19] States can also resort to policy restrictions (changes in the criminal law), manipulation and distraction of public opinion, intimidation, and persecution of activists.[20]

Overall, the debate of whether social media can prevent or facilitate democratisation is not definitively solved, but a consensus seems to have emerged that social media can either facilitate democratisation or bolster authoritarianism (or both), depending on contextual factors. Scholars of both camps also agree that both citizens (or netizens) and authoritarian states continue to employ different strategies and tactics for their own purposes; active citizens continue to challenge the state, while the latter finds ways to keep the former under control.[21] However, despite the existence of extensive literature on social media and the democratisation/authoritarianism nexus, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of spontaneously organised and politically less threatening strategies of civil society actors on social media platforms – daily covert resistance strategies and patterns that are visible in various forms of digital art (e.g., graffiti, installations) and humour (e.g., anecdotes, caricature, etc.). In other words, there is little knowledge of how and what kind of tools digital activists use to oppose the government's censorship efforts and criticise corruption and inefficiencies in authoritarian contexts.

Having said that, it should be emphasised that there is a growing body of literature that covers different methods in the use of social media to bypass or oppose government efforts to tightly control the flow of information. Yang and Wang[22] study four different political styles of online activism in China. Due to the different types of opportunities and cultural skills available to actors, these styles can be subversive, confrontational, playful, and consensus. In particular, they argue that in covering sensitive (to government) issues, netizens resort to playful style when they

Anti-Government Protests: Digital Media at Stake', *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 7 (1 October 2017): 976–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716682075.

[19] Aliaksandr Herasimenka, 'Political Organisation, Leadership and Communication in Authoritarian Settings: Digital Activism in Belarus and Russia' (PhD Thesis, University of Westminster, 2019).

[20] Morozov, *The Net Delusion*; Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77b21; Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2018. 'Turning the Virtual Tables: Government Strategies for Addressing Online Opposition with an Application to Russia', *Comparative Politics* 50, 3: 435–82.2018

[21] Aliaksandr Herasimenka. 2019. 'Political Organisation, Leadership and Communication in Authoritarian Settings: Digital Activism in Belarus and Russia'. PhD Thesis, University of Westminster.

[22] 'The Political Styles of Online Activism in China', *Contemporary Culture and Media in Asia*, 2016, 193–207.

"participate in contentious activities through the use of online humour, jokes, parody, cartoons, and other playful activities."[23] Recently, a few studies have emerged that examine the use of humour in social media in response to governments' policy failures or censorship efforts.[24] For example, Pearce and Hajizada, using the case of Azerbaijan, found out that while user-generated political humour also has similar effects as content created by professional media, authorities also can co-opt political humour to neutralize dissent.[25] In the context of Central Asia, a few studies are emerging that scrutinize the mobilizing potential of communication networks.[26] In these and other studies, scholars examine how activists use social media to challenge authoritarianism.[27] At the same time, the work of Bakhytzhan Kurmanov revealed certain limitations of digital activism in autocratic contexts, studying three Central Asian countries.[28] True, these few studies can shed some light on the social media-democratization nexus, but they are mostly country-specific and do not fully describe how art and humour can be used in shaping and expressing a dissenting opinion against policy failures, in particular corruption, in highly authoritarian contexts. This article aims to fill this gap through a case study of art and humour, social media and anti-corruption activism in the context of Uzbekistan.

State-Society Interactions and Everyday Resistance

The article draws on Joel Migdal's "state-in-society" approach[29] and James Scott's concept of everyday forms of resistance[30] to construct a conceptual

[23] Guobin Yang and Wei Wang. 2016. The Political Styles of Online Activism in China. *Contemporary Culture and Media in Asia*, 193–207. p. 193.

[24] Seçil Dağtaş. 2018. "Political Humor in the Face of Neoliberal Authoritarianism in Turkey," in *The Joke Is on Us: Political Comedy in (Late) Neoliberal Times*, 105; Umut Korkut et al. 2020. "Looking for Truth in Absurdity: Humour as Community-Building and Dissidence against Authoritarianism," *International Political Science Review*, 0192512120971151

[25]   Katy Pearce and Adnan Hajizada. 2014. "No Laughing Matter: Humor as a Means of Dissent in the Digital Era: The Case of Authoritarian Azerbaijan," *Demokratizatsiya* 22, no. 1 (2014): 67.

[26] Jasmin Dall' Agnola and Colleen Wood. 2022. "The Mobilizing Potential of Communication Networks in Central Asia", *Central Asian Affairs,* 9: 1-15.

[27] Daniyar Kosnazarov. 2019. "#Hashtag Activism: Youth, Social Media and Politics in Kazakhstan" George Washington University – Central Asia Program; Diana Kudaibergen. 2024. *The Kazakh Spring: Digital Activism and the Challenge to Dictatorship.* Oxfor University Press.

[28] Bakhytzhan Kurmanov. 2023. "Digital Citizen Activism in Central Asia: Beyond Contestation and Cooperation" in *Polarization, Shifting Borders and Liquid Governance* (eds. Anja Mihr & Chiara Pierobon), Springer.

[29] Joel S. Migdal. 2001. *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[30] James Scott. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press; James Scott. 1992. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

framework that will allow us to analyse civil society's patterns of covert and spontaneous resistance within social media platforms.

Migdal's "state-in-society" approach[31] offers a nuanced perspective on the interactions between state institutions and civil society under authoritarian regimes. The state-in-society model sees the state and society as intertwined entities that engage in mutually transforming interactions. For Migdal, society is made up of numerous social forces, including both informal organisations and formal entities, with patterns of domination primarily determined by struggles across multiple arenas of domination and opposition. Seen from this lens, digital activists' use of art and humour covertly criticising high-level corruption and kleptocratic practices can be conceptualised as a form of mundane resistance. In this regard, as Migdal argues, the state is subject to the 'pushes and pulls' in society's multiple arenas, facing resistance from other social forces when imposing its normative order, given that non-state social forces promote different versions of how people should behave. These struggles for dominance and instances of resistance occur not only in policy arenas but also within the basic moral order and the structure within which the rights and wrongs of everyday social behaviour are determined.[32] In the context of anti-corruption efforts, this approach helps elucidate how civil society actors, in particular digital activists, negotiate the constraints imposed by the state while seeking to address issues of corruption and governance inefficiencies.

There is strong support for Migdal's state-in-society approach in the field of resistance studies. Hence, Scott's concept of everyday forms of resistance[33] provides a valuable analytical tool to understand how weaker groups navigate and contest domination within authoritarian contexts. Scott's framework highlights subtle, non-coordinated acts of resistance that challenge power dynamics through actions such as evasion, foot-dragging, and subversion. These actions often occur at an individual level and may not be immediately visible, making them effective strategies for circumventing state control.[34] Scott's concept of "transcripts" (hidden and public) is closely related to the article's focus on spontaneous and covert micro-political operations performed by social media activists in Uzbekistan. By applying this framework, we can uncover how civil society actors in Uzbekistan employ covert tactics, such as digital art and humour, to critique government inefficiencies and corruption, thereby offering a unique perspective on how resistance manifests in the face of limited political freedoms.

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[31] Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society*.
[32] Ibid.
[33] James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.
[34] Ibid.

Through the integration of Migdal's "state-in-society" approach and Scott's concept of everyday resistance, the article seeks to explore the complex dynamics of anti-corruption initiatives within Uzbekistan's authoritarian context. By examining how civil society actors negotiate power structures in online contexts and employ less overt strategies of resistance, this theoretical framework helps to analyse the transformative potential of grassroots efforts in challenging corruption and shaping state-society relations.

Methodological Considerations

We have conducted (digital) ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Uzbekistan between June 2018 and August 2023 for a total of four months. We have conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with prominent (artist) bloggers, street artists, influencers, and opinion-makers who enjoy wide popularity among the population in Uzbekistan. In addition, we have also interviewed other popular bloggers who do not necessarily use art or humour on social media, but cover general socio-political news in the country. In these interviews, we focused on such key questions as (a) the general political climate in the country; (b) the censorship and political environment under which civil society activists operate; (c) forms and methods that they utilise to criticise and covertly oppose the authoritarian tendencies; (d) the role of the art and humour in these resistance strategies; (e) the reaction of the state digital activists' covert resistance; (f) the examples or processes of how online activism translates into offline action; and (g) future governance trajectories and the implications of civil society initiatives for broader political and social change in Uzbekistan. Due to our informants' safety concerns, we do not provide any excerpts from the interview. However, the interviews we conducted informed our analysis of the nuances of navigating in the opaque media environment in an authoritarian context.

As a field site, our digital ethnography took place in the Uzbek segment of social media. More specifically, we focused on Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and Instagram, the most popular social media platforms in Uzbekistan, where digital activists, including bloggers and artists, perform their daily resistance to the authoritarian regime, particularly focusing on government inefficiencies and corruption cases. Telegram remains the most popular social media platform in Uzbekistan. According to some reports, as of early 2023, Uzbekistan had 123,000 channels with a total audience of 740 million people, ranking second (after Russia) in terms of the number of channels and their audience on Telegram.[35] While hundreds of bloggers have emerged in recent years, our focus was

[35] "Uzbekistan second in the world in the number of Telegram channels," 23 March 2023. https://pr.uz/vtoroe-mesto-po-chislu-tg-kanalov/

primarily on those who criticize government inefficiencies and corruption through art and humour. Unlike other non-political bloggers, their audience is relatively modest, with the number of followers ranging from 30,000 to 300,000 (combined across different platforms). However, due to the quality of their audience, these approximately two dozen bloggers are considered influential, as indicated by the government's occasional reactions and the higher price of advertisements on their channels.

We particularly focused on posts by Dima Qayum, Inkuzart, Habicatura, and Rais Buva, who post sarcastic or artistic materials on key developments in Uzbekistan and the broader post-Soviet world, produce caricatures, murals, and graffiti, as well as share anecdotes and satirical stories which covertly hint at corruption and kleptocratic practices in the higher echelons of the government. These posts are widely disseminated and discussed among a wide range of social media users representing various population groups in Uzbekistan. Producing, disseminating, and discussing such artistic allegories, euphemisms, and sarcastic posts on online platforms are seen by bloggers, artists, and ordinary people as relatively safe ways of resistance and criticism in an authoritarian regime context. Observing these forms of daily resistance in social media allowed us to understand the dynamics of state-society relations.

To complement our digital ethnography, we also conducted ethnographic study in rural and urban areas of Uzbekistan, where we focused on examining how the processes taking place in an online context are reflected in physical spaces, that is, in the context of everyday life in different parts of Uzbekistan. We used the well-established "go-along method" of ethnographic research, which allowed us to actively explore our subjects' stream of experiences and practices as they move through and interact with, their physical and social environment.[36] The primary method of data collection during the ethnographic fieldwork was observations and informal interviews in social spaces and at events at which most people in Uzbekistan come together and exchange information on a daily basis (*guzars, choykhonas*, weddings, *gap-gashtak*, etc.). We have focused on people's opinions on and reactions to political developments in Uzbekistan, by looking at how art and humour shared in an online context are reflected in local narratives and stories about corruption and state inefficiency, how they perceive and talk about the government interference, corruption and kleptocracy, and how their understanding of the rule of law impacts their interaction with the state officials.

We, as researchers, placed a high priority on ethical considerations in data collection and analysis. Given the authoritarian context of Uzbekistan,

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[36] Margarethe Kusenbach. 2003. "Street Phenomenology: The Go-along as Ethnographic Research Tool." *Ethnography* 4 (3): 455–85.

it was not easy to establish direct contacts with bloggers. While some bloggers easily agreed to be interviewed and even allowed us to use their real (or their nicknames on social media), others agreed to be interviewed after being assured that participant confidentiality and privacy would be guaranteed and all data collected would be anonymised to protect participants' identities. It should be emphasised that our interpretation of caricatures, murals, graffiti and humour does not represent the opinion or position of the bloggers who produced them. Rather, these interpretations stem from our observations and analysis of the Uzbek segment of social media. Additionally, the research adhered to ethical guidelines concerning cultural sensitivity and respect for local norms and practices.

Digital Activists and Artists: A Subtle Challenge to Corruption

Uzbekistan has long been characterised by autocratic governance, limited media freedom, and a lack of respect for human rights. Under the rule of its first President, Islam Karimov, who held power for a quarter century until his death in 2016, Uzbekistan's government exercised strict control over information and stifled dissent. Media outlets were tightly controlled by the state, resulting in limited journalistic independence and press freedom.[37] Human rights organisations consistently reported widespread abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and restrictions on freedom of expression.[38] Furthermore, corruption became deeply entrenched within Uzbekistan's institutions and society. The country consistently ranked poorly on global corruption indices, reflecting a pervasive culture of bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement.[39] These developments had severe implications for governance, economic development, and the overall well-being of the population.

The new president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power in 2016, launched economic and political reforms that contributed to improving the country's heavily corrupt and closed image. Mirziyoyev's liberalisation policies led to a notable expansion of online media and digital discourse. In the following years, the internet emerged as a prominent platform for debates, discussions, and critical publications. This period marked a significant departure from the previous regime's tight control over media outlets and the suppression of dissenting voices. The newfound openness allowed for the establishment of numerous new media outlets, contributing to a vibrant landscape of digital journalism and diverse perspectives.

[37] Sarah Kendzior. 2015. "'Recognize the Spies': Transparency and Political Power in Uzbek Cyberspace." *Social Analysis* 59 (4): 50–65.
[38] Freedom House. 2013. "Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2013 - Uzbekistan." 2013. https://www.refworld.org/docid/51efca3523.html, accessed September 5, 2023.
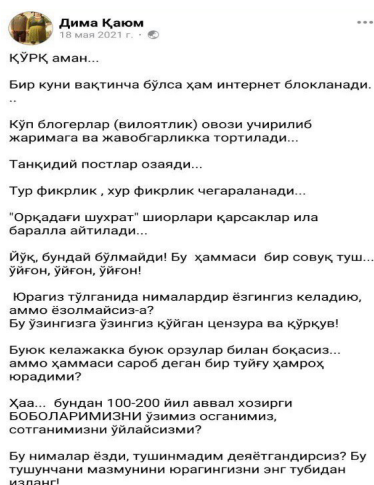[39] Rustamjon Urinboyev and Mans Svensson. 2024. "Law, Society and Corruption: Lessons from the Central Asian Context." Routledge: London.

One notable outcome of this liberalisation was the emergence of a cohort of influential social media activists, often referred to as bloggers in Uzbekistan. While operating within certain limits, these bloggers gained prominence for their ability to openly critique social problems prevalent in the country. Bloggers have become a formidable force in shaping public discourse and advocating for change in the country. In an environment where traditional media is subject to stringent controls and censorship, social media platforms have started to provide a space for citizens to voice their opinions, express grievances, and initiate conversations on topics deemed sensitive by the government. However, this initial wave of liberalisation experienced a significant reversal in more recent years. The government's stance shifted, leading to a tightening of restrictions on media freedom.[40] This was particularly evident through the arrests of several prominent and outspoken bloggers, who had gained recognition for their incisive critiques.[41] Although the charges brought against these bloggers often pertained to alleged unrelated offences, such as fraud, their arrests sent a clear signal about the boundaries of permissible discourse in the country. These events served as a stark reminder that the freedoms initially granted to online media were subject to limits and constraints, undermining the once burgeoning atmosphere of open dialogue. The state's tightening control over social media activists had been anticipated by Dima Qayum already in 2021, when the situation around media freedom was relatively better than the current situation

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[40] HRW, 'Uzbekistan's Election Highlights Lost Hopes for Reform', *Human Rights Watch* (blog), 7 July 2023, https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/07/uzbekistans-election-highlights-lost-hopes-reform; Umida Niyazova, 'Uzbek Journalists and Bloggers Suffer from Mirziyoyev's Broken Promises on Freedom of Speech', 20 June 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/uzbek-journalists-and-bloggers-suffer-from-mirziyoyevs-broken-promises-on-freedom-of-speech/, accessed September 5, 2023.
[41] Alva Omarova. 2023. 'Dynamic Repression Amid Uzbekistan's Snap Presidential Election', https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/dynamic-repression-amid-uzbekistans-snap-presidential-election/; Lola Olimova. 2023. "Blogger is a dangerous profession in Uzbekistan," https://cabar.asia/en/blogger-is-a-dangerous-profession-in-uzbekistan.

Figure 1. Dima Qayum's prediction that media freedom would be further diminished

> **Дима Қаюм**
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Source: Retrieved by authors

Bloggers' covert form of resistance

The arrest of several bloggers reverberated throughout society, leaving many aware of the precarious state of media freedom in the country. As a result, bloggers who once felt empowered to openly discuss issues of corruption and governance inefficiencies now find themselves in an atmosphere of fear. Faced with the risk of government persecution and growing uncertainty, bloggers adapted their approach by resorting to covert and creative ways of addressing corrupt and kleptocratic practices in Uzbekistan. The use of digital art and humour, including graffiti, murals, caricatures, sarcastic anecdotes and allegories, has emerged as a subtle yet potent approach to navigating the constrained space for dissent and critique. In this complex landscape, these covert resistance strategies have come to play a pivotal role in expressing dissatisfaction with corrupt practices while circumventing direct confrontation with the authorities.

Seen from the lens of Scott's concept of "transcripts," the use of art and humour on social media platforms can be viewed as spontaneous and covert micro-political operations performed by social media activists under the conditions of authoritarian rule. The visual nature of art allows artist bloggers to convey complex messages and critique government actions in a manner that transcends language barriers. For instance, a mural depicting a famous character from a classic Uzbek film, "Shum bola" (Naughty boy), carrying a heavy sack labelled "corruption" on his

shoulders conveys a message that resonates without relying on words: corruption is a heavy burden on the shoulders of Uzbek people (Figure 2). The image of the mural went viral when it first appeared in Tashkent in April 2022. It was shared thousands of times on various social media platforms, with many people posting photos taken in front of the mural, sparking widespread discussions. As another blogger commented, "Maybe this wall will become a Wailing Wall for the people of Uzbekistan who are losing and getting poorer every day in the fight against corruption." The authorities, who had painted over some of the artist's previous critical murals, did not paint over this one, as it could send a strong message to society that the government doesn't see corruption as a problem. The fact that the mural was painted on the adjoining walls of the Anti-Corruption Agency of Uzbekistan added to the irony of the situation.

Figure 2. Bloggers also use humour as to explain the meaning of corruption to ordinary people.

Source: Retrieved by authors

Figure 3. The definition of corruption presented by Dima Qayum

Source: Retrieved by authors

Figure 4. Criticism of the automotive market

Source: Retrieved by authors

Or consider another mural which depicts a lengthy line of individuals patiently waiting to purchase a car (Figure 4) The mural serves as a critical commentary on a twofold issue. Firstly, it highlights how the government-controlled company has monopolised car production and sales within the country. Stringent tariffs and customs fees on imported

vehicles have led to a scarcity of cars[42]. Secondly, the mural points out the challenges faced by ordinary citizens attempting to purchase even these government-monopoly cars. Many individuals are forced to pay bribes to expedite the process of obtaining their vehicles. In this example, the artist employs visual storytelling to encapsulate the complexities of government policies and citizens' struggles. By depicting a seemingly simple scene of a car queue, the mural symbolically captures the wider issues of corruption and government inefficiencies. The absence of explicit language again allows for covert communication, enabling artist bloggers to convey their concerns without running afoul of censorship. This form of art bridges the gap between artistic expression and political commentary, speaking volumes to those who encounter it. This mural also went viral as it reso-nated with hundreds of thousands of social media users, many of whom had experienced long queues or had to pay bribes to purchase scarce cars. For example, on Instagram alone, the video of how the mural was created gathered 25,000 likes and 600 comments. The post was so viral that the authorities had the mural painted over the next day, which sparked further discussion both online and offline.[43]

In the realm of digital activism, humour serves as a subversive weapon against corruption. Satirical memes, cartoons, and anecdotes cleverly encapsulate criticisms of government actions and highlight the absurdity of corrupt practices.

Figure 5. Prioritization of scarce energy resources

Source: Retrieved by authors

Figure 5 illuminates a paradoxically intricate situation concerning

[42] Many foreigners are amused by the abundance of Chevrolet-only cars in Uzbekistan, the monopoly car producer in the country, and have made funny comments. For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQE8eAt9cPs.

[43] Kun.uz, 2021, "Tashkent Street Art on Auto Monopoly and Queues Removed," 6 Sept 2021, https://kun.uz/news/2021/09/06/toshkentda-avtosanoat-monopoliyasi-va-uzun-navbat-larga-bagishlangan-strit-art-paydo-boldi

the scarcity of energy resources, such as natural gas, for households and small businesses in a country with abundant natural gas reserves. The caricature captures this paradox by portraying an old man in traditional Uzbek attire (symbolising a government official) chastising a local entrepreneur for purportedly siphoning gas from a pipeline to fuel either a brick factory or a greenhouse (both of which rely on natural gas for operation). As the old man pulls by the entrepreneur's ear, admonishing him with the words, "Son, you must be ashamed for stealing what belongs to others!", two figures representing Russia and China (indicated by their attire matching their respective flag colours) stand nearby, nodding in agreement and accusation. This caricature humorously underscores the irony of a nation exporting substantial amounts of natural gas to China and Russia, while its local population and businesses grapple with energy resource deficits.[44] This satirical portrayal reflects the subtle power of digital art in conveying complex socio-political messages. The image encapsulates the frustration felt by many in Uzbekistan, where citizens experience the dissonance between the country's rich natural resource endowment and the difficulties they encounter in securing basic energy resources for their daily lives. The caricature deftly captures the dual narrative of energy wealth juxtaposed against the practical energy challenges faced by ordinary people.

Despite the risks associated with openly challenging corruption, digital activists in Uzbekistan continue to navigate the boundaries of acceptable dissent. They are acutely aware of the potential repercussions and employ a strategy of covert resistance to mitigate the threat of state persecution. By employing art and humour, they manage to criticise government inefficiencies and corrupt practices while maintaining a level of deniability that safeguards them from direct retaliation. Their resilience and creativity exemplify the potential for civil society to adapt and thrive even in the face of authoritarian constraints.

In the case of Rais Buva's caricature (Figure 6), it pertains to the collapse of the Sardoba dam, an incident that occurred on May 1, 2020. This event resulted in significant flooding in the Syrdarya and Jizzakh regions of Uzbekistan, as well as in neighbouring Kazakhstan. The flood forced over 70,000 people to evacuate and tragically led to the loss of at least five lives. It also resulted in the complete destruction of over 2,500 houses and 76 multi-story buildings, with a similar number of structures suffering damage.[45]

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[44] The authors have elsewhere depicted how households in Uzbekistan address the scarcity of natural gas, see Rustamjon Urinboyev and Sherzod Eraliev. 2022. 'Informal Civil Society Initiatives in Non-Western Societies: Mahallas in Uzbekistan', *Central Asian Survey* 41, 3: 477–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2058915.

[45] FVV, '*Sardoba suv omboridan suv chiqishi bo'yicha birlamchi ma'lumot'* [Preliminary Information on the Sardoba Dam Collapse], 1 May 2020, https://fvv.uz/uz/news/sardo-ba-suv-omboridan-suv-chiqishi-boyicha-birlamchi-malumot .

While the government's initial response and support for those affected were relatively well-received by the public, there was considerable criticism regarding the poor construction of the dam. Additionally, dissatisfaction arose because only low-level officials were held accountable for the disaster, while high-level officials escaped consequences. Initially, authorities promised a transparent investigation and appropriate punishment for those responsible, but the actual investigative process was slow, and court proceedings were conducted behind closed doors. Ultimately, only a few mid-level officials were found guilty. Speculation circulated that the dam's construction was linked to a powerful family with members in both government and business, fuelling public criticism.[46] In response to allegations of a sluggish and non-transparent investigation, officials even suggested the possibility that various animals, including rodents, foxes, and catfish, might be responsible for the dam's collapse.[47] This explanation was met with public skepticism, with many believing that it was an attempt to shield high-level corrupt officials who might have played a role in the catastrophe.

In Figure 6, the central character, while fishing, encounters a catfish that raises the question, "Rais Buva, have they identified those responsible for the 'Sardoba' collapse yet? I can't face my family due to the shame and accusations!" This caricature highlights the public's frustration and demand for accountability in the aftermath of the dam collapse.

By adopting a humorous approach, digital activists create a sense of solidarity among citizens and foster a shared understanding of the problems they face. This sense of common purpose, fuelled by the shared experience of humour, strengthens the collective voice against corruption while operating within the constraints of an authoritarian environment.

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[46] *Ozodlik. 2021. Sardoba: Omon qolganlar hikoyasi* [Sardoba: Story of the Survived], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGvpUftemlk, accessed September 5, 2023.

[47] Daryo. 2020. '*Zoologlar ko'rsichqon va tulkilarning Sardoba to'g'onining yemirilishiga ta'sirini o'rgandi'* [Zoologists studied the effect of rats and foxes on the erosion of the Sardoba dam], Daryo.uz, 6 June 2020, https://daryo.uz/2020/06/06/zoologlar-korsichqon-va-tulkilarning-sardoba-togonining-yemirilishiga-tasirini-organdi, accessed September 5, 2023.

Figure 6. Rais Buva's caricature hinting at corruption within the higher echelons of the government
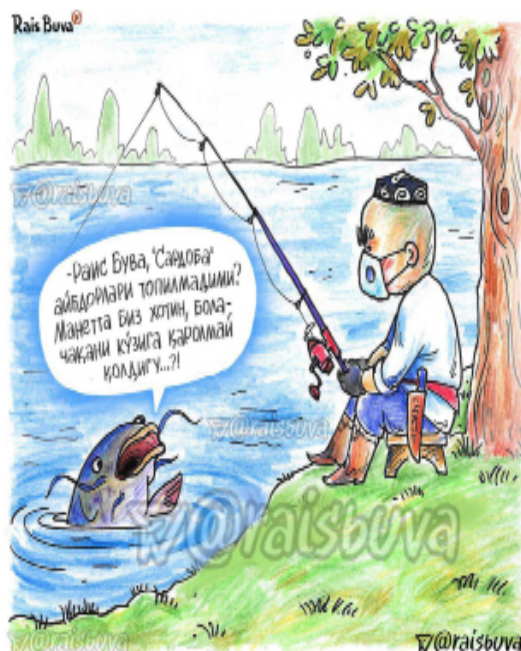
Source: Retrieved by authors

> It's funny because everyone, including government officials, knows corruption was the main result of the burst [of the dam]. But because those who must be held accountable are very powerful people close to the top echelons of power, it's difficult for law enforcement to launch an investigation against them. Maybe there was indeed a role of rodents [in the collapse of the dam]. However, the government's efforts to try to investigate all other possible reasons but corruption look funny. That's why caricatures mocking this kind of absurdity resonate well with followers.[48]

Bloggers also covertly hint that they have limited freedom and that they cannot discuss high-level corruption and kleptocracy, as visible in Figure 7: "In the shallower waters, you can advocate for justice by splashing around like a child, freely criticising corruption and bribery. However, if you attempt the same in the deeper waters, the larger sharks will swiftly

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[48] Anonymous blogger, Tashkent, April 22.

seize you, enclosing you in a cage (leading to arrest). Hunting in the shallows is easy; even the big sharks will applaud your efforts and may sometimes reward you. But should you aspire to venture into the deeper realms, abandon hope for your safety, for it is an unchanging law of life. Only a bigger shark can vanquish a big shark. Do you grasp the essence of my message, my fellow blogger?"

Figure 7. Self-censorship and high-level corruption, Dima Qayum

Source: Retrieved by authors

Dima Qayum's above text underscores a crucial aspect of the bloggers' experiences in authoritarian contexts: a deep awareness of the boundaries within which they must operate. These digital activists have an acute understanding of the risks associated with openly challenging corruption and government inefficiencies. Consequently, they exercise a form of self-censorship, strategically choosing the issues they address and the manner in which they do so. When we analyse these processes through Scott's framework of hidden forms of everyday resistance, bloggers understand that openly challenging corruption and powerful officials

can have dire consequences. Therefore, they employ covert strategies, such as humour, satire, and allegory, to critique these issues indirectly. This approach enables them to navigate the treacherous waters of dissent while minimising the risk of immediate suppression.

Digital activists' art and humour campaigns ripple through the digital landscape, sparking conversations and debates that might otherwise be stifled. The visual impact of their creations, coupled with the interactive nature of social media platforms, draws attention to the inadequacies of the government and fosters a critical mindset among citizens. These campaigns resonate with a diverse audience and provide an alternative narrative that challenges the dominant official propaganda discourse.

Another pertinent example is a caricature by Rais Buva (Figure 8), which covertly and slyly hints at a 2023 referendum to change the country's constitution that many believe was initiated by the current president, Mirziyoyev, in order to extend his term of office.[49] Challenging the legitimacy of the 2023 referendum was a taboo in the Uzbek political landscape. Not wanting to risk their life and safety, many prominent Uzbek bloggers refrained from openly talking about the legitimacy of the referendum, but some bloggers like Rais Buva used caricature to covertly mock it. In order to stay safe, Rais Buva usually refers to a fictional kolkhoz (collective farm during the Soviet times), but everybody in the country knows that he is actually talking about Uzbekistan.

Figure 8. Rais Buva's criticism of the referendum

Source: Retrieved by authors

49 The Guardian. 2023. "Uzbekistan president wins referendum on extending powers." 1 May 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/01/uzbekistan-president-shavkat-mirziyoyev-wins-referendum-on-extending-powers

People on the left: "You've abandoned taking care of the *kolkhoz,* rais buva! If you can't work [effectively], please free your chair. We will elect another chairperson!" Rais buva in response: "Don't make me nervous! Let's hold a referendum instead!"

State response to covert resistance

As civil society actors in Uzbekistan employ various strategies to challenge corruption and government inefficiencies, the state responds by utilising a range of tactics to maintain its control and suppress dissent. The state employs strategies of censorship, surveillance, and misinformation to curtail online discussions that challenge the government's authority.[50] Uzbekistan's restrictive online environment involves stringent content filtering, surveillance of online activities, and intimidation of digital activists. Dissenting voices that emerge within online communities are met with state-sponsored trolling, cyberbullying, and fabricated charges. In 2022-2023, dozens of outspoken bloggers have been arrested by the authorities, though their charges are seemingly unrelated to their vocal criticism of the government's actions.[51] Also in 2023, around 40 journalists and bloggers signed an open letter to President Mirziyoyev, expressing their worries about censorship, pressure, and intimidation.[52] These events collectively paint a troubling picture of Uzbekistan's declining freedom of expression, assembly, and association despite earlier positive strides in political liberalization and media freedom.

As arrests of some bloggers intensified in 2023, our informants displayed growing concerns about their safety. One blogger, who posted regularly a couple of years ago, even started to have long pauses in his postings, referring to his busy schedule. In a private conversation, though, he admitted:

Everyone now is very much worried. Seeing what has

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[50] Kurmanov, *Digital Citizen Activism;* Morozov, *Net Delusion;* Herasimenka, *Political organization.*

[51] To cite a few cases, in January 2023, the Uzbek authorities detained seven journalists on extortion charges, the biggest raid targeting media workers since the incumbent president took office in 2016 (https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-detains-seven-journalists-in-secretive-raids). In July 2023, Olimjon Haydarov, a vocal critic of officials in Qo'qon city, was arrested on extortion charges and later in December was sentenced to eight years in prison (https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/a-tale-of-2-uzbek-bloggers-arifhojaev-freed-khaidarov-jailed/). In August 2023, Abduqodir Mominov, a prominent blogger with nearly 250,000 subscribers on his Youtube channel received more than seven years of prison sentence (https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/32535417.html). Also in August 2023, the Uzbekistan Interior Ministry issued an arrest warrant for Sanjar Ikramov, a blogger likely based in Turkey (with 200,000 subscribers on Youtube) for his alleged crimes dating back to 2011 (https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-freedom-of-speech-arrests-bloggers/32552409.html).

[52] https://www.gazeta.uz/uz/2023/03/04/freedom-of-press/

happened to some fellow bloggers, I can't post as before. But I can't be pro-government either. That's why I have to take these long pauses [in posting]. I prefer not to post anything rather than praising the government and becoming a court blogger or criticizing the government and falling out of its favour.[53]

By controlling digital platforms, the state seeks to consolidate its power and maintain a narrative that serves its interests. This control limits the emergence of independent civil society initiatives capable of challenging corruption and advocating for accountability. The inability to operate freely within both offline and online spaces impedes the development of a vibrnt civil society that can act as a check on state power.

As civil society actors continue to employ innovative strategies and digital platforms to challenge corruption and government inefficiencies, the state's responses will likely evolve in tandem. The ongoing interaction between civil society resistance and state suppression shapes the evolving landscape of governance and democratisation in Uzbekistan. It underscores the complex interplay between citizen agency and state control, highlighting the enduring struggle for accountability and transparency within an authoritarian context.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to provide a comprehensive and context-specific exploration of how social media activists employ art and humour to criticise and challenge corruption and government inefficiencies in authoritarian contexts. To this aim, the article used the case of bloggers in Uzbekistan. It contributes to the academic discourse by showcasing the intricate interplay between covert resistance strategies, state-society interactions, and the prospects for democratic change. It underscores the importance of considering alternative forms of civil society engagement beyond overt activism, particularly in contexts where overt opposition is met with repression.

This study's significance lies in its contributions to three key areas. Firstly, it highlights the resourcefulness of civil society actors who adapt their strategies to navigate state-imposed limitations. Viewed from Migdal's state-in-society perspective, their ability to express dissent and critique through covert means demonstrates the potential for civil society to operate even within authoritarian environments, thereby covertly challenging the predatory practices of the kleptocratic elites. Secondly, the examination of digital activists' use of social media platforms unveils the

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[53] Anonymous blogger, Tashkent, February 2024.

transformative potential of technology in shaping political narratives and challenging authoritarian tendencies. The ability to disseminate messages, even through allegorical imagery, art and humour, illustrates the power of information dissemination in the digital age. Thirdly, by focusing on anti-corruption initiatives in Uzbekistan, this research informs broader discussions about the role of (online) civil society in enhancing governance accountability and transparency within authoritarian regimes.

In its exploration of Uzbekistan's intricate anti-corruption efforts, this article adds depth to our understanding of the interplay between civil society and the state in non-democratic regimes. The experiences of civil society actors and digital activists in Uzbekistan, their successes and challenges, provide valuable insights into the potential for change and the complexities of pursuing democratic ideals within restrictive environments. We attempted to demonstrate the strategies employed by these actors reflect not only their resilience, but also the potential for transformation in societies that strive for accountability and transparency, even in the face of significant hurdles.

While this study provides valuable insights into the strategies employed by digital activists in Uzbekistan to challenge corruption and government inefficiencies, it's important to acknowledge several limitations that impact the assessment of their impact on democratisation in authoritarian contexts. One major limitation is the challenge of establishing a causal link between the use of art and humour on social media and actual democratisation outcomes. It's difficult to definitively measure whether these covert resistance strategies directly contribute to political change or merely serve as a means of expressing dissent. What we can observe is the process of change in political and legal culture among the population. Topics that were previously taboo are now being openly discussed in everyday discourses, a pattern that we observed during our daily encounters during the fieldwork. Second, the study relies on qualitative data, including interviews and observations within online communities. While these sources offer valuable insights into the strategies employed by digital activists, they do not provide quantitative data that can demonstrate the scale or reach of these strategies. This limits the ability to generalise findings to a broader population. Moreover, authoritarian regimes often adapt to challenges, including those posed by digital activists. This study captures a specific moment in time, and the political landscape in Uzbekistan and similar contexts may evolve, affecting the strategies and impact of digital activism.