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15. The impregnable fortress of Islamic public administration in Central Asia: *mahalla* institutions in Uzbekistan

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INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 led to the emergence of 15 independent states. The Soviet collapse was proclaimed by the Western world as a victory for freedom, a final triumph of democracy over communism, and proof of the superiority of legal traditions of Western culture over socialist (Soviet) law based on Marxist-Leninist ideology. There was widespread euphoria in the 1990s that the introduction of Western-style institutions and traditions would play a pivotal role in promoting the rule of law and democratisation in non-democratic regimes (Putnam 1993). These global discourses paved the way for the proliferation of numerous Western-backed initiatives in post-Soviet countries, primarily focused on promoting good governance, the rule of law, and democratisation (Bromley and Powell 2020).

Like other newly independent countries, Uzbekistan has become a "laboratory" for testing various global (Western) good governance, democratisation, and rule of law initiatives. The political leadership of Uzbekistan proclaimed their strong commitment to promoting democracy, the rule of law, and the market economy, as well as their intention to introduce a Western-style public administration (PA) system (Karimov 1992). In turn, these official proclamations were reflected in institutional and legal reconfigurations, which, among many other changes, led to the introduction of a Western-style constitution and public administration institutions, including the parliament, the judiciary, a human rights ombudsman, and an anti-corruption agency. At the same time, as a nation-building strategy, the Uzbek leadership made it clear from the early years of independence that Uzbekistan's public administration system, while adhering to Western PA models, would also capitalise on its centuries-old traditions and indigenous (pre-Soviet) governance institutions (Karimov 1993).

More than three decades have passed since Uzbekistan embarked on its nation-building journey. Yet, many commentators now argue that Uzbekistan has made little progress in "transplanting" Western-style institutions and traditions into its public administration system and that many formal institutions of government have achieved a mere showcase quality (Luong 2002; Ilkhamov 2007; Perlman and Gleason 2007; Adams et al. 2018; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022). The international indicators of the rule of law and state capacity, such as the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index (WJP 2022), Freedom House's Democracy Index (2023), and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (TI 2022) consistently portray Uzbekistan as a paradoxically "strong-weak state", which is strong when it comes to using coercive strategies but weak in terms of implementing the rule of law and good governance. In other words, the Soviet-style governance methods involving the extensive use of coercion and surveillance remain persistent in the actual practices of state institutions and actors, while the application of laws is selective and arbitrary. A poignant example of these processes is the resilience and ever-growing influence of (Soviet-era) law enforcement agencies (e.g., the *Prokuratura* (General Prosecutor's Office) and the State Security Service, known as *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti* (KGB) during Soviet times) on the functioning of public administration institutions (Ilkhamov 2007; Markowitz 2008; Anceschi 2021). One possible inference from these developments is that Uzbekistan's PA system looks "Western" when we analyse its institutional and legal landscape, and "Soviet" when observing how public administration institutions work in practice. This means it is possible to glean the patterns of two dominant traditions shaping Uzbekistan's public administration system: Western and Soviet PA models.

Academically, there is a wide array of research addressing Uzbekistan's governance trajectories. Much of the literature focuses on authoritarianism and the persistence of Soviet-style governance (Fane 1996; Kubicek 1998; Melvin 2004), kleptocratic elites in the upper echelons of the state organisation (Ilkhamov 2007, 2017), malfunctioning public administration structures (Melvin 2000; Ergashev et al. 2006), administratively commanded economic policies (Zettelmeyer 1998; Pomfret 2000; Kandiyoti 2007; Ruziev et al. 2007), clans and regional patronage networks (Luong 2002; Ilkhamov 2004; Collins 2006), inefficient post-Soviet agricultural reforms (Wegerich 2006; Trevisani 2007), corrupt law enforcement agencies, and inadequate ways of dealing with corruption on the part of state authorities (Markowitz 2008).

The conclusion of previous research seems clear: the bulk of scholarly literature examining Uzbekistan's governance system tends to focus on macro-level topics and state-centred approaches, analysing the struggles and alliances among multiple state actors operating at the central, regional, and local levels. This approach, however, runs the risk of aggrandising the state's role as the

only source of normative order in society, determining the main parameters of everyday social behaviour. Within the sociology of law and legal anthropology, there is an understanding that the state and its institutions and laws are constructed and reconstructed, invented and reinvented when they come into contact with informal institutions and norms (Moore 1973, 1978; Griffiths 1986, 1992; von Benda-Beckmann 2002). Hence, states face enormous resistance from social forces in implementing their policies since their laws and regulations must compete with the informal norms of other social structures that promote different versions of how people should behave (Migdal 2001). Such struggles and interplay between different legal orders are particularly evident in traditional Central Asian societies where a large portion of society, especially the rural inhabitants, still preserves its devotion to traditional values, religion, and customary norms (Poliakov 1992; Khalid 2003; Pashkun 2003). This leads me to suggest that, when studying public administration systems in countries like Uzbekistan, one should focus not only on the formal institutions and norms but also examine informal institutions and norms, which play a more salient role in everyday life than the formal institutions.

As noted in previous sections, Uzbekistan's PA system appears to reflect a peculiar blend of Western and Soviet PA models. However, one salient PA institution overlooked in the scholarly literature on Uzbekistan is the legacy of Islamic public administration (Islamic PA), which can be visualised when observing everyday life in micro-level social arenas. This oversight is somewhat surprising given that Uzbekistan has a Muslim majority and was the "heartland" of three *Sharia*[1]-law-based independent states (Khiva and Kokand Khanates and the Emirate of Bukhara) until the early twentieth century. One reason for not recognising the legacy of Islamic PA could perhaps be the ambitious policies of the Soviet Union and the current Uzbek regime to curb Islam's role as a political and social force. If the Islamic context is mentioned within research, the emphasis is usually placed on (a) the repressive policies of the Uzbek government in relation to ordinary believers (Kendzior 2006; Khalid 2014); (b) Islam's deployment as a means of state legitimation (Khalid 2003; Luong 2004); (c) radical Islamic groups (Allison and Jonson 2001; Naumkin 2005); and (d) Islam's role in shaping the moral context of people's lives (Louw 2007; Rasanayagam 2011). Drechsler (2013) argues that one of the most important determinants for governance in Muslim-majority countries would probably be Islam, regardless of whether or not the state in question is secular. Hence, with the exception of a few studies (Urinboyev 2014; Drechsler 2015), the context and legacy of Islamic PA in Uzbekistan

[1] Islamic law, which refers to the holy laws of Islam that govern every aspect of a Muslim's life.

is neither well researched nor understood and is generally ignored due to the over-emphasis on Uzbekistan's formal PA system.

Based on the above considerations, in this chapter, I argue that the more the focus moves from a state-centric understanding of PA to ethnographic analyses of everyday life and micro-level social processes and structures, the more it becomes discernible that Islamic PA continues to exist and operate at the grassroots/micro-level arenas of Uzbekistan despite the rapid proliferation and imposition of Western PA models and institutions worldwide following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These processes will be explored through the ethnographic study of *mahalla* institutions (neighbourhood communities) in Uzbekistan, an indigenous governance structure originating from Central Asia's Islamic past and administrative traditions. The chapter argues that *mahalla*, an indigenous cooperative governance institution (cf. Chafik and Drechsler 2022; Drechsler and Chafik 2022), which is anchored in Islamic principles, has now become an institutionalised feature of Uzbekistan's PA (through legislative codification and executive incorporation) and now operates partly on behalf of the state and partly as a local-level provider of social welfare, public goods, and dispute resolution. More specifically, I will demonstrate how *mahalla*-based customary norms, religious practices, actors, values, and principles shape everyday life and social relations, offering workable solutions for local-level problems and needs. Hence, this chapter aims to illuminate the processes and dynamics of the *mahalla* system and how it has evolved to respond to the declining state capacity in the post-Soviet period, acting as a pseudo-local government entity given the failure of the Uzbek government to secure the basic needs of its citizens.

The rest of the chapter is organised in the following manner. The next section presents the brief history and main features of *mahalla* institutions in Uzbekistan that are crucial in understanding the sociopolitical context of the country, how Islamic values and rituals shape social relations and community ties within *mahallas*, and the reason why I focus on *mahallas* as an embodiment of the Islamic PA system in Central Asia. In section three, I discuss methodological issues and present the results of my ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2022 in rural Ferghana, Uzbekistan. Finally, the last section draws out the implications of the ethnographic material for broader public administration debates and highlights the most important findings of the chapter.

POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE LIFE OF *MAHALLA* DURING PRE-SOVIET, SOVIET, AND POST-SOVIET TIMES

In Central Asia, there are different terms (e.g., *mahalla*, *guzar*, or *qavm*) used to refer to neighbourhood communities. *Mahalla* is the most commonly used term, particularly in Uzbekistan (Geiss 2001a). The term *mahalla* comes from the Arabic word "*mahali*", which means "local" (Noori 2006). In contemporary Uzbekistan, *mahalla* is commonly used to describe the (local) residential neighbourhood community, uniting residents through common traditions, language, customs, moral values, and the reciprocal exchange of money, material goods, and services (Urinboyev 2013). Most Uzbeks identify themselves through their *mahalla*. For example, if a native is asked where s/he lives, the answer will be "I live in *mahalla* X" (Noori 2006). This implies that everyone in Uzbekistan technically belongs to one *mahalla* (Sievers 2002). Today, there are 9,361 *mahallas* in Uzbekistan (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022), and, on average, each *mahalla* may contain between 500 to 10,000 residents (Noori 2006).

There has been a wide array of research on *mahalla*, investigating its historical context and administrative transformations during pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods (Sukhareva 1976: Abramson 1998; Geiss 2001a; Sievers 2002; Kamp 2004; Noori 2006; Rasanayagam 2009; Urinboyev 2011; Dadabaev 2013). However, despite a diversity of scholarly approaches to and explanations for *mahalla*, there is one common dilemma for scholars studying *mahalla*. As Sievers (2002, 103–104) notes, this dilemma can be explained by the fact that "*mahalla* are neither regionally uniform nor static, nor are the types of public goods available to *mahalla* residents". Moreover, Sievers states that *mahallas* have changed for centuries due to the establishment/collapse of empires and/or the arrival of new ethnic groups or tribes. Reckoning with these historical transformations, Sievers suggests that any analysis 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, a brief historical overview of pre-Soviet (Islamic) and Soviet *mahalla* may be in order.

The origin of the *mahalla* institutions dates back to the pre-Mongol period, around the eleventh or twelfth centuries, when Islamic empires dominated the political landscape of Central Asia (Geiss 2001a; Sievers 2002). Pre-Soviet *mahallas* were usually communities of several hundred people organised around Islamic law (*sharia*), rituals, and social events (Geiss 2001a). It was common for many *mahallas* to have a *hovuz*, an open pool of water, especially in situations when a stream or canal did not run through a neighbourhood. Many *mahallas* emerged along professional lines, specialising in trades such

as metalworking, music, or food production. Even though there were some ethnically exclusive *mahallas*, such as Jewish or Arab *mahallas* in Bukhara (Sukhareva 1976), an ethnically homogeneous *mahalla* was a rarity in medieval Central Asia due to inter-ethnic marriages, economic conditions, the hiring of mercenaries for security, and other factors (Sievers 2002). Olga Sukhareva (1976), a Russian anthropologist specialising in the study of *mahallas* in medieval Bukhara, notes that *mahallas* possessed their own mosque, teahouse (*choykhona*), bazaar, cooking areas, water supplies, cemetery, and other facilities, which were accessible only to their residents. Due to their proximity to people, *mahallas* served as a mechanism through which charitable institutions' (*waqf*) services reached society's most economically vulnerable groups. From this perspective, the study of pre-Soviet *mahallas* provides insights into the history of public service provision in medieval Central Asia, illustrating how public goods flowed primarily from *mahalla* and *waqf*, while the state played a marginal role in service provision (Sievers 2002), a historical pattern and continuity that can be observed when analysing the role of *mahallas* in contemporary Uzbekistan.

As Geiss (2001a) writes, the governance of pre-Soviet *mahallas* was based on Islamic values and traditions. The most important public space in the *mahalla* was the mosque, where residents met daily, exchanged news, and made decisions. Devotion to Islam and the acknowledgement of the demands of Islamic law (*sharia*) were prerequisites for acquiring full *mahalla* membership. In other words, one could acquire membership if the *mahalla* community agreed to a newcomer's purchase or construction of a house within its territory. But, most importantly, the position of a newcomer was not contingent on having a kinship or genealogical connection to descent groups/families in the *mahalla*. Rather, one gained the *mahalla*'s full membership and acceptance by participating in the communal and religious activities of the community and by leading an Islamic way of life. This implies that *mahalla* was not a community of relatives since people from different areas, professions, and ethnicities could acquire a house and, consequently, the status of a resident and full member if they contributed to communal activities and pursued an Islamic way of life. Geiss (2001b) argues that the development of *mahallas* into such all-encompassing neighbourhood-based structures largely resulted from the Islamisation of societies in Central Asia and the subsequent increase in the role of Islamic (*sharia*) law in *mahalla*'s governance, which led to the gradual erosion of kinship and tribal affiliations.

Traditions and norms (*urf-odatlar*) around life-cycle rituals and community celebrations were strictly enforced. As Geiss (2001a) describes, all *mahalla* residents were expected to participate in and contribute (financially or materially) to *mahalla*-based life-cycle rituals and ceremonies, such as circumcision, weddings, and funerals. This rule applied even to those residents living in the

mahalla temporarily. This was because *mahalla* membership did not depend on kinship but on having a resident status in the *mahalla*. As a result, family feasts, circumcision, marriages, and funerals involved the participation of all residents of the *mahalla*. These processes illustrate that *mahalla*-level group solidarity was maintained primarily through residency and neighbourhood relations rather than kinship ties or ethnic affiliation. Hence, the *mahalla* has historically been one of only a few effective traditional institutions that united diverse social groups by creating a common identity based on a shared residence (Dadabaev 2013).

The *imam/mullah* and the *oqsoqol*, a leader of the *mahalla*, literally translating as "whitebeard", played a crucial role in the administration of the *mahalla*. The *imam* served as a religious leader and provided religious and spiritual guidance to the *mahalla* community, while the *oqsoqol* was responsible for the day-to-day governance of the *mahalla*. This included the implementation of various duties and tasks such as the collection of taxes, welfare provision to needy families and orphans, dispute resolution, the preservation of order and security in the *mahalla*'s territory, common maintenance and cleaning of water and irrigation infrastructure and other common facilities, as well as the organisation of communal celebrations and ceremonies. In getting *mahalla* members to fulfil all these duties and tasks, the *oqsoqol* did not have any means of coercive power. Still, he exerted considerable influence on residents' behaviour by harnessing the power of traditions, social norms, and popular opinion of the collective, as well as by relying on his charisma and personal authority as a *mahalla* leader (Sievers 2002). The *oqsoqol* was elected by *mahalla* residents with the assistance of the *imam* in the mosque. To be elected as an *oqsoqol*, the candidate was expected to come from a reputable family and possess personal integrity and wealth. Possessing such personal qualities allowed the *oqsoqol* to maintain influence and authority in the *mahalla*. When internal or external disputes occurred, *mahalla* residents usually contacted him to settle conflicts peacefully. Given that the *oqsoqol* enjoyed respect and authority, no *mahalla* member could easily ignore his opinion, advice, or decisions. The *oqsoqol* was thus a man of the community and represented the *mahalla*'s interests both internally and externally, when interacting with the government authorities (Sukhareva 1976; Geiss 2001a).

Following the onset of Soviet rule in Central Asia, there were numerous interventions by Soviet policymakers to eradicate religious and traditional structures. As Sievers (2002) describes, these interventions were driven by the understanding that only a homogenous set of institutions across the entire space of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) could create the supranational *homo Sovieticus*. This approach signalled the end of traditional and religious structures such as nomadism, *Sharia*-law courts, mosques, and *waqf* institutions. As a result, the Soviet government attacked and eradicated many

religious and traditional practices and structures, replacing them with state courts, law enforcement structures, schools, hospitals, and baths. However, as an exception to this modernisation campaign, *mahallas* were not targeted for dissolution, thereby remaining as the last fortress of Islamic public administration in Central Asia. There were serious concerns within Soviet government circles that efforts at eradicating *mahallas* would produce social unrest. Realising that the *mahalla* constituted the core of Uzbek social organisation and a centre of power, the Soviet government changed its strategy towards *mahallas* and, instead, adopted a series of laws and policies aimed at co-opting and incorporating *mahallas* into the Soviet system of administration (Abramson 1998). Reflecting a colonial administration pattern, the Soviet policymakers were content to leave *mahallas* with their traditional features as long as they served the Soviet regime and ideology (Kulchik et al. 1996).

These developments had significant repercussions for the role and autonomy of *mahalla* institutions. While Soviet-era *mahallas* carried the same name as medieval *mahallas* and looked similar on the surface, they had been transformed into fundamentally different institutions (Sievers 2002). While pre-Soviet *mahallas* exercised a certain degree of autonomy from rulers, the Soviet regime actively used *mahallas* to disseminate community ideology (Abramson 1998). As Dadabaev (2013) writes, *mahalla*-based social spaces such as *choyknonas* (teahouses) were a particular target of the Soviet administration. Given that *mahalla* residents gathered at these social spaces daily, the Soviet authorities tried to transform them into "red *choykhonas*" by creating in each *choykhona* special reading corners consisting of magazines, books, and posters in various scripts and languages (Roosien 2021). In addition, the Soviet authorities also established a "women's group" in each *mahalla* which was tasked with resolving women's issues and changing traditional lifestyles. To maintain law and order, Soviet authorities established several parastatal organisations such as the "neighbourhood watch" and "comrade courts", which served as *mahalla*-level extensions of the police, the public prosecutor's office, and the courts (Dadabaev 2013).

Another administrative intervention included the establishment of a Soviet assembly and executive committee in cities and districts. The main task of these executive committees was to implement the state's resolutions in local government settings. A *mahalla* representative committee was established under these committees' direct control and jurisdiction. Each *mahalla* representative reported to the executive committee once or twice a month on how he or she implemented assigned tasks and instructions. Even though the official purpose of the *mahalla* committee was to create a dialogue between *mahalla* residents and Soviet authorities, in practice, the *mahalla* committee served as a *mahalla*-level extension of the Soviet administration. In doing so, the Soviet authorities tried to shift power away from religious and traditional authorities

to the executive committees in each district (Dadabaev 2013). This intention was reflected in the legal framework regarding *mahallas* (adopted in 1932),[2] which created a precedent for the *mahalla*'s twin functions: social control and state service delivery (Noori 2006). The 1932 legislation assigned numerous administrative functions and tasks to *mahallas*, which ranged from collecting fees and government taxes, supporting women's emancipation, and assisting in military recruitment, to providing financial and organisational support to local schools, assisting in the local distribution of state funds, supporting local government bodies in service delivery, registering marriages, births, and deaths, and many other service delivery tasks which are usually implemented by state institutions in modern states.

Consequently, the excessive state intervention significantly changed the nature of everyday *mahalla* life and social relations. The interventions weakened *mahallas*' welfare and public goods provision capacity. While pre-Soviet *mahalla* residents primarily relied on their *mahalla* and *waqf* to gain access to public goods (and expected almost nothing from the state), late Soviet *mahalla* residents began to see the state as the primary provider of education, healthcare, water, and law and order (Sievers 2002). Another pernicious effect of these interventions was that residents' attachment to their communities, especially their trust in the authority and legitimacy of *mahalla* structures, was seriously undermined (Dadabaev 2013). The *oqsoqol* became a symbolically elected leader of the *mahalla*, whose appointment was strictly controlled by the local party apparatus. The premises of the *mahalla* committee often resembled a typical Soviet building filled with Soviet symbols and portraits of Soviet leaders (Sievers 2002). Hence, *mahalla* committees functioned as direct affiliates of the local branch of the Communist Party (Noori 2006).

It should, however, be noted that the aforesaid Soviet interventions did not fully eradicate the *mahalla*'s traditional and religious structures. On the one hand, Soviet interventions led to the emergence of formal *mahalla* committees, which acted on behalf of the state and assisted local government bodies in maintaining law and order and delivering public services. On the other hand, despite Soviet authorities' co-optation efforts, *mahallas* turned out to be resilient institutions. They were able to retain many of their informal features, an array of covert strategies visible in the emergence of informally elected *oqsoqol* and *imams*, covert funerals and praying in the congregation (*jamoat namozi*) in private domains, and informal dispute resolution practices (Abramson 1998; Sievers 2002; Dadabaev 2013). In his study of Soviet-era *mahallas*, Dadabaev (2013) shows that during the Soviet period, both an official and an unofficial

[2] *Polozhenie o makhallinskikh (kvartarl'nykh) komitetakh v gorodakh UzSSR*. 17 April 1932.

mahalla existed within the same locality. But, despite their shared geographic location, there were significant differences between these two types of *mahallas* with respect to the participation of residents in local governance. As Dadabaev notes, in contrast to official *mahallas* that acted as a sub-unit of the executive committees/local government, unofficial *mahallas* were relatively autonomous, more focused on community concerns and needs, and relied on moral and religious values in organising mutual support and welfare provision activities. Nonetheless, *mahallas* maintained a very low profile due to Soviet authorities' intolerance towards religious and traditional practices.

With the dawn of an independent Uzbekistan in 1991, *mahallas* became a buzzword in Uzbek policymaking circles. Almost all major reform initiatives touched upon *mahallas* (Noori 2006). Uzbek authorities presented *mahalla* to the general public and international community as an authentically Uzbek, indigenous form of self-government, which could serve as the basis for building a civil society in Uzbekistan (Karimov 1993). *Mahallas*, which served as sub-units of the district executive committees during the Soviet period, received a new legal status in independent Uzbekistan following the adoption of "*Mahalla* Law – The Law on Institutions of Self-Government of Citizens" in September 1993. As a result, part of the *mahalla*'s informal functions have been formalised (through legislative codification and executive incorporation), and now *mahalla* activities are largely regulated by state law. Under the *Mahalla* Law, *mahallas* are now responsible for implementing an extensive array of administrative tasks, ranging from monitoring the religious practices of residents, preventing divorce, allocating state subsidies and bank loans to low-income residents, assisting law enforcement in halting drug and alcohol abuse, job creation and developing *mahalla*-based small businesses, to rehabilitating former prisoners. From a legal standpoint, *mahalla* is defined as a citizens' self-government institution tasked with representing the interests of their residents before state institutions. But, when considering the magnitude of the aforesaid administrative tasks, it is quite obvious that *mahallas* have simply become sub-units of the local state administrations (*hokimiyat*) throughout Uzbekistan. Thus, post-independence legal interventions can be viewed as a continuation of Soviet-era policies and have further incorporated *mahallas* into the public administration system (Noori 2006).

However, despite the Uzbek authorities' attempts to incorporate *mahallas* into the public administration system, *mahallas* continue 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. With few exceptions (Louw 2007; Dadabaev 2013; Urinboyev 2014; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022), much of the previous research concentrates on analysing the "formal/official" *mahalla* system, which operates within the realm of the *Mahalla* Law

(Abramson 1998; Sievers 2002; Kassymbekova 2003; Massicard and Trevisani 2003; Kamp 2004; Masaru 2006; Noori 2006; Warikoo 2012). This approach is quite understandable, given the coercive and invincible image of the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan. The state is indeed an omnipotent actor in terms of using coercion and extensive surveillance in regulating the activities of the "formal" *mahalla*. Yet, the state and its coercive structures have a limited role in shaping "micro-political operations" that take place at the level of the informal *mahalla*. We cannot confine the analyses of *mahallas* to merely being the "eyes and ears" of the authoritarian regime. Rather, *mahallas* are dynamic institutions and constantly evolve to respond to the changing socio-political landscape. As Dadabaev (2012, 2013) argues, even during the Soviet era, despite the Soviet government's zeal to eradicate religious and traditional structures, *mahallas* were able to preserve their "unofficial" self-governance functions centred around an informal network of residents who engaged in information sharing and a voluntary mutual support system. Therefore, when discussing the effects of the Uzbek government's legal intervention on the *mahalla*, there is a need to distinguish between the "formal" and "informal" faces of the *mahalla*.

The above considerations indicate that *mahallas* have become a hybrid institution with formal and informal features, which I categorise in this chapter into (1) administrative/formal *mahalla* and (2) social/informal *mahalla*. The formal *mahalla* functions in accordance with the *Mahalla* Law and represents the long arm of the state within local communities, serving as a sub-unit of the local government and, increasingly, as the (state) mechanism of social control. In contrast, the informal *mahalla* operates in accordance with Islamic values and principles and acts on behalf of residents of the *mahalla*, as they collectively mobilise around alternative welfare and service provision activities to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of the state from service delivery. This distinction is especially important when analysing the legacy of Islamic PA in Uzbekistan, which can be visualised when observing how informal *mahalla*-based practices and interactions are given moral significance by being placed within an Islamic frame. These processes become particularly visible when we ethnographically attend to everyday life, enquiring into *mahalla* residents' perceptions of a just and fair legal order, the strategies they employ when interacting with one another, and the moral frame into which they place their actions and events. Hence, the study of Islamic PA in the context of everyday *mahalla* life could provide useful insights for improving the current state of research on public administration in Muslim societies like Uzbekistan. These processes will be illustrated through the case study of informal *mahalla* and everyday life in rural Fergana, Uzbekistan. Before moving on to the empirical section, in the next section, I will discuss the methodological considerations and fieldwork in Uzbekistan.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This chapter is based on an ethnographic study conducted in Uzbekistan between April 2009 and November 2022 (for a total of 21 months). The primary method of data collection during the fieldwork was observations and informal interviews. These were conducted in the *mahalla*'s social spaces and at events at which most residents come together and exchange information daily. Namely, I regularly visited conversational hotspots such as the *guzar* (community meeting space) and *choykhona* (teahouse), as well as life-cycle events, rituals, and socialising events such as weddings, births, circumcision ceremonies, funerals, and monthly get-togethers (*gap*) of the *mahalla* residents. These hotspots are public and open to all *mahalla* residents and guests. Since I was a native and possessed cultural competence and extensive social networks at the field site, I had direct access to these hotspots, which enabled me to collect a variety of narratives and stories about everyday *mahalla* life and social relations. The informants included a diverse group of people holding various social positions, representing both "people of influence" (*mahalla* leaders, religious leaders, wealthy families, local state officials) and ordinary residents. As I met more than ten *mahalla* members daily, it was difficult to keep track of the exact number of people I spoke to during the field trips. Thus, the narrative I provide in the next section can be seen as a collection of the voices of hundreds of *mahalla* residents I encountered during my daily visits to these social hotspots.

These strategies allowed me to collect rich ethnographic material on *mahalla*, the role of Islamic values and practices in daily life, and state–society relations in Uzbekistan. The informants were fully informed about the purpose, methods, and use of this research. Due to the nature of the political regime in Uzbekistan, oral consent was received from all research participants during the fieldwork. To ensure maximum anonymity, I have changed the names of the informants, the villages, and the *mahallas* and provided only the most general information about any specific fieldwork site. For this chapter, I have chosen to present the case study of Karvon *mahalla* in rural Fergana, where I conducted extended ethnographic fieldwork between 2009 and 2022.

FIELDWORK CONTEXT: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN KARVON *MAHALLA*

Karvon, where I conducted my fieldwork, is a *mahalla* in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan. It consists of 120 households (*oilalar*) with a population of more than 1,500 people. At the time of my fieldwork, the Karvon *mahalla* was administered by both a formal leader (*rais*, elected according to the *Mahalla* Law)

and an informal leader (*oqsoqol*, informally elected by *mahalla* residents). As residents I encountered recall, before the Uzbek authorities' legal intervention, the Karvon *mahalla* was led by an *oqsoqol*, whom residents informally elected during a gathering at the *mahalla*'s mosque. In addition to the *oqsoqol*, the *imam* (a religious leader) also played a key role in the *mahalla*'s everyday governance by providing religious and spiritual guidance and leading religious rituals during life-cycle events. However, the adoption of the *Mahalla* Law in 1993 led to the formation of two parallel power structures in the *mahalla*: (1) the formal *mahalla* committee administered by a *rais* and his or her assistants, state-salaried employees; and (2) the informal *mahalla* administered by an *oqsoqol* whom the *mahalla*'s residents elect informally, without the local government's interference. The *rais* had a small state-owned office space located within the territory of the *mahalla*, while the *oqsoqol* utilised *mahalla*-owned infrastructure and social spaces such as a mosque, *guzar*, or *choykhona* as an office space. Given that the *rais* and his or her assistants worked on behalf of the local state administration (*hokimiyat*), *mahalla* residents saw them as the "eyes and ears" of the government. In contrast, the *oqsoqol* and *imam*, two informal leaders of the *mahalla*, enjoyed the trust and respect of residents since they worked pro bono and represented the interests of residents vis-à-vis the state, even when the *mahalla* residents' actions were non-legal and often contradicted state law. As part of their daily work, these two informal leaders also coordinated life-cycle events (weddings, circumcisions, and funerals), collected donations from wealthier residents and distributed them to needy households, mediated disputes among residents, gathered money from each household for *mahalla*-based irrigation, heating, or road-asphalting projects, and organised *hashar* (community-based mutual assistance work) for cleaning and maintaining *mahalla*-owned infrastructure.

Guzar (village meeting space), *masjid* (mosque), *choykhona* (teahouse), *gap* (regular get-together), and life-cycle events were the main public sites in the Karvon *mahalla*. Since residents met daily at these social spaces, they served as key social arenas where local politics and norms were formed, negotiated, and reshaped through dialogue, rumours, alliances, and reciprocal relationships. Typically, it was possible to find 10 to 15 male residents sitting in the *guzar*, regardless of whether it was the morning, afternoon, or evening. Women's socialising and information exchange activities usually took place either in the streets or inside the household. Since residents met regularly (often daily) at the *mahalla*'s social spaces and attended most of the socialising events, they had a relationship of mutual dependence. Having a common residence and meeting and interacting daily produced a general expectation that residents should help their *mahalla* members whenever assistance was needed. *Mahalla* residents who ignored or failed to comply with these norms often faced social sanctions, such as gossip, ridicule, loss of respect and reputation, humiliation,

and even exclusion from community events. Thus, money was not everything in Karvon *mahalla*: upholding one's honour, respect, prestige, and reputation were equally important. Hence, give-and-take rituals constituted an integral part of everyday interactions in Karvon *mahalla*.

Daily conversations in Karvon *mahalla* revolved mainly around economic problems, remittances, gas and electricity cuts, and life-cycle rituals. Given the existence of job opportunities and fairly good social welfare services during Soviet times, residents expected that the state in post-independence Uzbekistan would continue to have a presence in their daily lives by providing welfare and public goods. Karvon residents had expected things to further improve in the post-independence period as the "wealth of Uzbek people would no longer be sent to Moscow but be retained locally and used for the welfare of the people". Through my observations of Karvon *mahalla* residents' lives over the last 14 years, I felt that the role and legitimacy of the state diminished significantly. As the state in contemporary Uzbekistan no longer provides jobs and all-encompassing social welfare services, many residents I met stated that the state was virtually absent in their everyday lives. Many *mahalla* residents complained about unaffordable healthcare costs, unemployment, inflation, and declining public services. In the residents' view, most of these economic problems were due to widespread corruption in the higher echelons of the government.

Thus, very few *mahalla* residents reaped the rewards of independence. Instead, many households in the Karvon *mahalla* heavily relied on migrant remittances, which were sent by their male members (husbands or sons) who worked in Russia and Kazakhstan. In addition to remittances, *mahalla* residents increasingly relied on social safety nets and mutual-aid practices within their extended family and *mahalla* networks. Altogether, these practices served as a shock-absorbing institution for many residents, enabling them to secure their basic needs and gain access to public goods, services, and social protection unavailable from the state. These *mahalla*-based mutual-aid practices created strong moral and affective bonds, enabling them not only to meet their livelihood needs but also to provide space for participation in everyday life and social interactions. Given the inability of the Uzbek government to secure the basic needs of its citizens, residents became increasingly reliant on *mahalla*-based welfare and service provision arrangements. Islamic values and principles played a key role in mobilising such mutual-aid practices. These processes will be demonstrated in the next sections.

INFORMAL WELFARE, SERVICE PROVISION, AND DEBT-BASED BUSINESS IN KARVON *MAHALLA*

While doing fieldwork in Karvon *mahalla*, I was struck by how Islamic values and sensibilities informed everyday social life and served as a moral and

regulatory framework for organising *mahalla*-based welfare and service provision activities. The *hashar* tradition is one manifestation of such *mahalla*-based practices, in which *mahalla* residents cooperate and pool their efforts and resources, which may include the reciprocal exchange of free/non-compensated labour, money, material goods, and services. The *oqsoqol* I interviewed said that post-Soviet economic decline has considerably increased the role of *hashar* as a means to stretch the livelihood risks within the community. *Mahalla* residents arranged a *hashar* for various reasons; for example, the organisation of weddings, funerals, and circumcision feasts, the construction of irrigation facilities, street-cleaning, asphalting of roads, the construction of dwellings or mosques, and many other services not provided by the state. Many *mahalla* residents saw their participation in *hashar* as attempts to be a good Muslim and pursue an Islamic way of life.

Accordingly, looking closely at everyday *mahalla*-based coping strategies allows us to obtain a sense of the texture of how Islamic values and sensibilities are embedded in the daily flow of *mahalla* life. The use of *hashar* for building the *mahalla*'s water and irrigation infrastructure is a relevant example in this regard. Since agricultural production is an important source of income in rural Ferghana, one of the main concerns of Karvon *mahalla* residents had to do with water and irrigation facilities. The local government did not provide any funding to build irrigation facilities, such as installing a pump for getting the groundwater to the surface, which would give people access to water during the agricultural season. Instead of securing people's water needs, the local government used a large proportion of the headwater for cotton and wheat production, effectively leaving ordinary people without access to water. In this regard, one of the biggest *mahalla*-based *hashar* projects in Karvon *mahalla* dealt with building a pump system for using the groundwater for agricultural purposes. As it was an expensive project, Nosir Rahmon, the *oqsoqol* of the *mahalla*, collected monetary contributions from each household. The amount of monetary contribution was determined based on the financial situation of each household. Wealthy households made bigger monetary contributions than low-income households, while those without sufficient financial means contributed with their labour. Nevertheless, despite the *mahalla*-based efforts, the money collected for building the pump system was insufficient. There were several rich families in the *mahalla*; however, only one of them, Aziz Hoji,[3] decided to finance the remaining part. When I interviewed him, Aziz Hoji explained his decision to finance the pump project with reference to Islamic principles. As he states, his assistance to the *mahalla* was driven by his belief

[3] Hoji is a holy title given to a Muslim who has successfully completed the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

that the one who provides water to people would go to *jannat* (paradise) after death. The case of Aziz Hoji illustrates the hidden role of Islam as a normative force in Uzbekistan, where Islam is incorporated not only in the posture of prayers and patterns of ritual intonation but also in the daily flow of *mahalla* life. This empirical example is also consistent with the common interpretation by social scientists studying Muslim societies, who argue that everyday interaction is given moral significance when placed within an Islamic frame (Bowen 1993; Lambek 1993; Rasanayagam 2011).

Another relevant example is a road-asphalting project, where residents succeeded in asphalting the roads of the *mahalla* without any financial assistance or supervision from the local government. Again, a large part of the asphalting 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 a good Muslim" is determined by their contribution to *mahalla* projects. Hence, while attending mosque gatherings and *mahalla choykhona* (teahouse), I noticed that residents regarded the donation activities of the *mahalla*'s wealthy residents as "acts of piety and charity". In the words of *mahalla* residents, sharing one's wealth with the wider community and giving *zakat* (income tax in Islam) and *ihsan* (doing good things for the benefit of others, such as helping poor people) to poor families were prerequisites for being "a good Muslim". These observations align with the findings of Johan Rasanayagam, who, in his book *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan* (2011), also demonstrated that the sense of being "a good Muslim" is not solely interior and personal but also produced and expressed in action and relations with others.

Islamic values also guided the local business practices in rural Fergana. There were many *mahalla*-based groups of traders and entrepreneurs who exported Uzbek agricultural products to Russia. *Mahalla* residents referred to these groups of traders as "*rassiychilar*" (entrepreneurs who do business in Russia). Given that each household in Karvon *mahalla* possessed a small plot of land, they used their land for growing fruits and vegetables such as cucumbers, grapes, peaches, apples, cherries, and apricots. In turn, *rassiychilar* groups bought vegetables and fruits from *mahalla* residents to export to Russia. Since the price of agricultural products was quite low on the local market, all *mahalla* residents tried to sell their products to the *rassiychilar.* What is noteworthy here is that *rassiychilar* did not make any payment to *mahalla* residents when collecting vegetables and fruits from their land. Rather, it was a debt-and-trust-based business in that *rassiychilar* borrowed the agricultural products from residents and exported them to bazaars and supermarket chains in Russia. After selling all products in Russia, a process

which may take from two weeks to one month, *rassiychilar* paid off their debts to residents. Although the economic size of these *mahalla*-based businesses was quite large, there was no written/formal contract regulating the economic transactions between *mahalla* residents and *rassiychilar.* Instead of having a written contract, parties relied on trust and Islamic values and business ethics in the sense that *rassiychilar* borrowed the fruits and vegetables from *mahalla* residents without paying any interest (*foiz/riba*). Residents and *rassiychilar* referred to Islamic terms such as *insof* (justice) and *halol* (permissible/lawful in Islamic law) when negotiating the terms and conditions of the contract. Since the relations between trading parties were based on Islamic principles and business ethics, all parties tried to comply given the heavy social interactions and social control. The party that deviated from the contractual obligations was regarded as a "bad Muslim" and was discussed and condemned as such by residents during prayers at the *mahalla*'s mosque.

The above example shows that Islamic values served as a regulatory framework for *mahalla*-based business practices, while state law was absent in everyday *mahalla* life. Many of those I encountered during the fieldwork reported that the cooperation between the *mahalla* residents and the *rassiychilar* resulted in significant improvements in the standard of living in rural Ferghana. Given their improved financial situation, *rassiychilar* took an active part in acts of piety and charity by giving *ihsan* and *zakat* from their yearly income and contributing to *mahalla* projects. Aziz Hoji, whom I discussed above, was also a *rassiychi* and regularly gave *zakat* and contributed to *mahalla* projects (*ihsan*). These empirical examples show that the main social policy pillars of Islam, such as *zakat* and *ihsan*, as well as interest-free business ethics, surprisingly survived long decades of Soviet atheism policy and remain an essential feature of everyday social relations in rural Ferghana. One possible inference is that Islam's role as a moral and normative force was quite obvious in rural Ferghana, inciting people to engage in acts of piety and charity. These examples confirm Shahrani's (1991) view that we cannot simply depict rural Muslims in Central Asia as all being ignorant of the fundamental Islamic teachings. Rather, local knowledge of Islam should be assessed by observing how various social groups and actors use it in their everyday life and discourse.

ENERGY DISPUTES AND INFORMAL *MAHALLA*

In this section, I will present ethnographic data on everyday energy disputes and the role of Islamic administrative values and actors in Karvon *mahalla*. More specifically, I will show how the *imam* and *oqsoqol* resolved the energy disputes by deploying Islamic values and moral codes. In Uzbekistan, the energy sector is a key social arena where the state and citizens interact daily. Although Uzbekistan is a major producer and exporter of natural gas, ordinary

people in rural areas of the country are forced to endure the cold winter months with little or no gas (heating), given that the government prioritises export sales over domestic consumers. The energy shortage has led to numerous localised protests in rural areas demanding that the government allocate more gas for domestic use (Pannier 2021). As a result, the energy shortage became an important avenue for a new form of community life and state–society relations. The effects of centralised energy policies are specifically felt in popular notions of entitlements and expectations. Given the existence of extensive gas reserves and energy production infrastructures, most Uzbeks view access to gas as a basic right, something that the state must provide to its citizens. In Uzbekistan, the formal state in this sense is "absent" since the state has limited capacity to fulfil its energy provision obligations. Considering the growing gap between central policies – which prioritise export sales over domestic consumers – and popular expectations that take access to energy for granted, we can infer that the role and experience of the state in everyday lives is changing, along with shifts in citizens' relationships to the state's laws and institutions. Thus, the discourse of energy is one of the key arenas where the state, as well as the idea of "what the state should provide to its citizens", is imagined, expressed, and enacted.

In Uzbekistan, as the state retreated from its energy provision obligations, ordinary citizens responded to these changes by creating an informal *mahalla* based on its normative order (social norms and traditions stemming from Islamic values and principles). An account of everyday energy disputes in the Karvon *mahalla* illustrates these processes. Like many other *mahallas* in Uzbekistan, Karvon residents also suffer the consequences of the natural gas shortage during the cold winter months as gas pressure in the pipes declines due to heavy demand. This situation led to fierce competition between *mahalla* residents over gas distribution. One way to increase the gas supply to a household was to install a pump ("*pilesos*" in the words of *mahalla* residents) that increased the gas pressure in a household's pipe by sucking more gas from the *mahalla*'s gas distribution system (GRB), which provides an equal share of gas to each *mahalla* resident. The *pilesos*, usually connected to the gas meter located inside the household, was not visible to anyone outside that specific household. Since the use of a *pilesos* was illegal, the district gas supply department (*raigaz*), in collaboration with the *rais* (the leader of the formal *mahalla*), regularly conducted raids to detect and fine households for using a *pilesos*. The *raigaz* often justified the low gas pressure by referring to the extensive use of *pilesos*. But when the *raigaz* entered the *mahalla* territory, the *oqsoqol* (leader of the informal *mahalla*) covertly informed all *mahalla* members about the raid so that they could hide their *pilesos*. The *oqsoqol* knew that he should be loyal to the informal *mahalla*, not to the *raigaz* or the formal *mahalla*, given

that the previous *oqsoqol* was removed from his position by the *mahalla* residents for collaborating with state officials.

There are different types of *pilesos*, ranging in price from US$5 to US$50, depending on the sucking capacity. If one household installs the most expensive *pileso*, hence the most powerful, other neighbouring households are left with little or no gas. This led to numerous conflicts between households. The role of the *oqsoqol* in such cases is to mediate conflicts. However, this mediation was temporary, and *mahalla* members had to create a more sustainable strategy to ensure peaceful coexistence. After several incidents, the *mahalla* residents gathered at the mosque and reached a decision that satisfied all residents: every household must use *pilesos* of the same size and capacity. The *oqsoqol*'s role was coordinating and controlling compliance with the *mahalla*'s decision. The *imam* also acted as an additional enforcement mechanism, declaring that installing large *pilesos* ("stealing neighbours' gas") was *haram* (forbidden, unlawful act in Islamic law). The *imam* commented that using large *pilesos* and overconsuming the community's gas is comparable to stealing from fellow Muslims, a sinful act forbidden by Islamic law. The *oqsoqol* and *imam*, accompanied by several *mahalla* activists, visited every household daily to monitor the implementation of the *mahalla* decision.

However, during these visits, it turned out that 11 households did not abide by the *mahalla*'s decision. This was because these households were the wealthiest and assumed they could ignore the *mahalla*'s decision given their higher social status. The members of those 11 households were described as bad Muslims who did not hesitate to use *haram* gas. This disobedience led to frustration among many low-income households, who demanded that the *mahalla* decision apply equally to everyone regardless of their financial situation. After wealthier households repeatedly ignored the *mahalla*'s call for compliance, a decision was made at the mosque that these households would be disconnected from the *mahalla*'s GRB. The next day, upon the *mahalla*'s request, a welder (also a *mahalla* resident) disconnected these 11 wealthy households' pipes from the GRB, an illegal action according to state law but a morally justified practice according to the informal norms (living law) of the *mahalla*.

Although members of the 11 wealthy households disagreed with this decision, they could do nothing since most residents insisted on disconnecting them from the GRB. Rather than challenging the *mahalla*, however, the 11 families bribed the *raigaz* and connected their separate gas pipes to their households, bypassing the *mahalla*'s GRB. These developments resulted in a new social group, dubbed by the *mahalla* residents as "the rich 11".

While these initiatives allowed the *mahalla* to exert some degree of control over the use of gas, they required constant raids and monitoring of *mahalla* residents' behaviours. Despite regular raids, it was impossible to fully control the size of *pilesos*. Some households covertly used larger *pilesos*, an uncertainty

that led people to accuse each other of noncompliance with the *mahalla* decision. To prevent further escalation, the *oqsoqol* and *imam* initiated another meeting of *mahalla* residents. During the meeting at the mosque, a decision was made that (1) the use of *pilesos* is strictly forbidden; (2) each household's gas meter should be moved to the street so that it is visible to everyone, rendering the use of *pilesos* impossible; and (3) all residents would demand that the *raigaz* increase the gas pressure given that all gas meters would be placed outside the household, visible to the *raigaz* inspectors. As a result, all households installed their gas meters on the street and were no longer able to use *pilesos*. This new situation provided leverage for the *oqsoqol* and *imam* to strike a deal with the head of the *raigaz* on increasing the gas pressure.

The above-presented case of gas disputes in Karvon *mahalla* shows us how daily mundane and spontaneous interactions, informed by religious and traditional practices, enabled the *mahalla* members to resolve disputes and establish order without resorting to formal dispute resolution mechanisms or formal *mahalla* leadership. Rather than facilitating people's disputes or addressing their grievances, formal *mahalla* leadership served more like a surveillance mechanism on behalf of the local government. It was the informal *mahalla* leadership that innovatively mediated the disputes and found workable solutions to people's daily needs, even though these strategies were not necessarily in line with state law. Accordingly, these micro-level power dynamics and negotiations coordinated by the *imam* and *oqsoqol*, particularly *mahalla* residents' use of religious terms ("bad Muslims using '*haram*' gas") and the welder disconnecting "the rich 11" from the GRB (an act which contradicts state law but is approved by the *mahalla*'s religious and traditional authority), illustrate the *mahalla*'s role as an Islamic PA institution predicated upon Islamic values and principles. These processes thus give us a clue to the existence of Islamic PA in Uzbekistan, which functions vis-à-vis the formal public administration system.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The primary aim of this chapter was to explore *mahalla* institutions as an archetypal example of an Islamic PA in Central Asian societies. In undertaking this task, I ethnographically attended to *mahalla*-level social norms and traditions with the aim of gleaning the patterns of Islamic public administration in everyday life situations. Empirically, through the case study of *mahalla* institutions, I attempted to show that, despite the persistent (Western) efforts aimed at transplanting Western-style PA models globally, it is still possible to glean the patterns of an Islamic PA at the micro-level arenas of society, or, as Chafik and Drechsler (2022) put it, in the semi-shadow of the Global West. In doing so, I suggested that the more the focus moves from macro-level arenas

to ethnographic, micro-level analyses of everyday life and social processes, the more it becomes discernible that *mahalla* institutions, equipped with Islamic values and administrative traditions, serve as an alternative (to the formal) governance and service provision structure. The results of the study clearly reveal that *mahalla* compensate for the incapacity of the state and provide alternative means of survival for ordinary people. When looking at the magnitude of *mahalla*-based informal coping strategies, it becomes obvious that the state has not been able to valorise its policies and symbols, while Islamic welfare values and ethics have developed into a parallel system of social welfare and service provision. In this connection, *mahallas* are still a largely Islamic PA structure in which people increasingly refer to Islamic values and ideals in their everyday life and social relations.

My findings have implications for broader scholarly and policy debates on why Western-backed rule of law, governance, and democratisation initiatives failed to produce their expected outcomes in non-Western, Muslim societies. This can be explained by the fact that many Western-backed PA reform initiatives hardly account for the local, indigenous cooperative governance institutions in non-Western societies that enjoy local recognition and legitimacy. Thus, in Muslim societies like Uzbekistan, PA reform efforts, rather than merely transplanting Western-style PA institutions, should, more importantly, focus on understanding indigenous Islamic PA institutions that may provide more realistic and context-sensitive solutions.

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