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Beyond Formal Law: Rethinking Anti-corruption Strategies in Central Asia's Plural and Hybrid Legal Landscapes

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INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in the early 1990s, the states of Central Asia embarked on ambitious projects of legal transformation (Anderson 2003; Luong 2004; Urinboyev 2024). Across the region, governments drafted new constitutions, adopted rule-of-law reforms, created anti-corruption agencies, and embraced global governance templates that promised transparency, accountability, and institutional modernisation (Hickson 2003;

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Newton 2003, 2012, 2017; Urinboyev and Svensson 2024). These efforts reflected a widespread belief—shared by domestic elites, international organisations, and development partners—that the introduction of Western-style legal institutions would recalibrate governance, constrain rent-seeking, and replace Soviet-era arbitrariness with predictable, rational-legal order (Luong 2002; Marat 2018; Perlman and Gleason 2007; Reeves et al. 2014; Ruziev et al. 2007; Urinboyev 2013). Yet as the decades passed, the lived reality of governance proved remarkably resistant to restructuring. Despite the proliferation of formal laws and the appearance of institutional reform, everyday interactions between citizens and state officials remained governed less by codified procedures than by pragmatic responses to uncertainty, personalised negotiations, and moral economies of reciprocity (L. L. Adams and Rustemova 2009; Anceschi 2021; Ismailbekova 2021; Lottholz et al. 2020; Urinboyev 2024; Urinboyev and Svensson 2024). Legal reform, in short, failed to produce legal transformation.

This persistent disconnect between formal design and lived practice constitutes the central puzzle that motivates this chapter. Even where laws multiply and institutional reforms are repeated, the basic patterns of informal governance—gift-giving, brokerage, administrative discretion,

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patronage, and context-sensitive rule-bending—continue to shape how citizens access services, solve problems, and negotiate with the state (Ilkhamov 2007; Polese et al. 2023; Tutumlu 2016; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013b; Werner 2000). From the perspective of policy makers, this appears paradoxical: why do anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms repeatedly fail to transform governance practices in Central Asia? And more specifically, what kinds of legal, social, and institutional dynamics produce the stubborn resilience of informal governance and corruption in the region? These questions, deceptively simple, speak to deeper analytical issues at the intersection of legal sociology, political anthropology, and governance studies.

The central claim of this chapter is that anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms cannot succeed without engaging the informal social orders that guide everyday decision-making. People operate within hybrid legalities—part state law, part community norm, part survival strategy—where everyday moral logics often override written norms. It is in these hybrid and plural legal landscapes that the meaning of legality is constructed and acted upon. Effective reform, therefore, must be anchored in lived experience rather than imposed from institutional altitude. Understanding this hybridity and plurality reveals the true terrain on which governance unfolds and the only terrain on which policy can operate meaningfully.

To explore these questions empirically and theoretically, this chapter adopts Uzbekistan as its principal case study. Uzbekistan is analytically revealing because it experienced two distinct political phases: first, a highly centralised and closed authoritarian regime that governed through tight control and pervasive informality; second, a post-2016 period of reformist rhetoric emphasizing transparency, modernisation, and state accountability. Despite the shift in discourse, the gap between law “on the books” and “law in practice” (i.e. “living law”) remains wide. Everyday governance continue to rely on personal networks, informal brokerage, and culturally embedded expectations of reciprocity. For this reason, Uzbekistan epitomises the contradictions at the heart of legal developments commonly observed in post-colonial legal landscapes: a state that continuously produces new laws and institutions while being simultaneously governed through tacit norms, improvisation, and situational accommodation. Examining Uzbekistan thus provides a powerful lens through which broader post-colonial patterns—of legal pluralism, informal order, and governance under uncertainty—can be observed.

This leads directly to this chapter's main research aim: to develop a socio-legal explanation of why anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms in Central Asia, and in Uzbekistan specifically, consistently fail to alter governance practices and to identify the social logics, institutional structures, and moral economies that sustain informal governance despite extensive formal reform. This chapter approaches this task through a multi-layered analysis grounded in legal pluralism, everyday governance, and the sociology of informality. This chapter is guided by three research questions:

- Why do extensive anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms fail to produce meaningful changes in everyday governance practices in Central Asia?
- What social, institutional, and normative dynamics sustain the durability of informal governance and corruption despite ongoing formal reform?
- How does the interaction between formal law and informal norms produce the hybrid legalities that shape everyday interactions between citizens and state officials in Uzbekistan?

To answer these questions, this chapter advances two hypotheses. First, formal reforms fail because they do not displace the underlying moral, social, and relational logics that structure decision-making; instead, they co-exist with and are absorbed into pre-existing informal systems. Second, informal governance persists not simply because institutions are weak, but because informal norms provide more efficient, predictable, and socially legitimate mechanisms for resolving problems than formal legal channels. By situating the analysis in Uzbekistan, this chapter provides an empirically grounded account of how citizens and officials navigate hybrid orders and why informal mechanisms remain pervasive under both authoritarian consolidation and reformist modernisation. Through ethnographic insight and socio-legal interpretation, it demonstrates that informality is not a residual deviation from an otherwise formal system but the central organising principle through which governance functions on a daily basis.

This chapter proceeds in five steps. It first situates the analysis within Uzbekistan's political and governance context, outlining the historical legacies, reform trajectories, and persistent gap between law on the books and law in practice that frame everyday governance. It then develops a socio-legal framework grounded in legal pluralism and the concept of living law, providing the analytical tools to conceptualise hybrid legality as a

stable mode of governance rather than a transitional distortion of reform. The methodological section outlines the ethnographic research design and explains how long-term, multi-sited fieldwork enables analysis across macro-, meso-, and micro-level arenas. The empirical core of this chapter follows, tracing how informality, moral reasoning, and relational practices structure governance in ceremonial life, citizen–state interactions, and central-level political economy. The final section synthesises these findings to reassess dominant assumptions in anti-corruption and rule-of-law debates, arguing for reform approaches that engage the lived moral and institutional realities through which governance is actually enacted.

UZBEKISTAN, GOVERNANCE REFORM, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF HYBRID LEGAL ORDERS

Uzbekistan constitutes a particularly instructive case for examining the limits of anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms in authoritarian and hybrid political regimes. Since independence in 1991, the country has undergone repeated cycles of institutional redesign, legal reform, and administrative modernisation (Anceschi 2021; Bowyer 2018; Ergashev et al. 2006; Gazeta.uz 2016; Ilkhamov 2004; Ruziev et al. 2007), yet the everyday practices through which governance is enacted have remained deeply embedded in informal legal orders (Ruziev 2021; Urinboyev and Dogan 2023; Urinboyev and Svensson 2024). These orders operate alongside, within, and sometimes against formal legal institutions, producing a system of hybrid legalities in which written law represents only one among several normative frameworks guiding behaviour (Sobirov and Urinboyev 2024; Urinboyev 2023, 2025; Urinboyev and Ibragimov 2025). Understanding this co-existence is essential for analysing why extensive reform efforts have failed to translate into substantive changes in everyday governance.

The foundations of this hybridity were laid during the early post-Soviet period (Dadabaev 2013; Massell 1967). Following independence, Uzbekistan embarked on state-building under conditions of acute political uncertainty, economic vulnerability, and regional instability (Fane 1996; Kandiyoti 2007; Spechler 2007). Under President Islam Karimov, the regime prioritised political stability, territorial control, and regime survival over political pluralism or market liberalisation (Karimov 1997; Ruziev 2021). While the state formally adopted institutions associated with liberal

constitutionalism, including a parliament, courts, and a codified legal system, these institutions functioned largely as instruments of executive power rather than autonomous sites of accountability (Ilkhamov 2017; Markowitz 2008; Trevisani 2007; Urinboyev 2013). Law served less as a constraint on authority than as a flexible resource mobilised to discipline society and manage elite competition (L. Adams et al. 2018; Rasanayagam 2011b; Urinboyev et al. 2018).

This governance model produced a paradoxical configuration often described as a “strong–weak state”: strong in its coercive capacity and surveillance apparatus, yet weak in its ability to provide predictable, impartial, and accessible public services (Spechler 2007; Urinboyev and Dogan 2023). Extensive administrative control over economic activity, combined with heavy regulation and punitive enforcement, generated high transaction costs for both citizens and businesses (Kandiyoti 2007; Pomfret 2000). In this context, informality emerged not as a marginal or residual phenomenon, but as a central mechanism through which governance operated. Personal networks, unofficial payments, and negotiated compliance became routine tools for navigating an arbitrary bureaucratic environment (L. Adams et al. 2018; Aminova and Jegers 2011; Urinboyev et al. 2018).

Crucially, these informal practices were not widely experienced as deviant or illegitimate. Rather, they were embedded in everyday moral reasoning shaped by scarcity, obligation, and reciprocity (Rasanayagam 2011a; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013b). For many citizens, compliance with formal rules was less meaningful than adherence to socially recognised norms governing fairness, mutual assistance, and survival (Urinboyev 2011; Wegerich 2006). This moral economy reframed legality as a situational concept, evaluated in relation to concrete outcomes rather than abstract principles (Urinboyev and Svensson 2024). As a result, the boundary between legal and illegal action became fluid, negotiated in practice rather than fixed by statute.

The gradual retrenchment of the welfare state further entrenched these dynamics. Although the Uzbek government initially preserved elements of Soviet-era social protection to maintain legitimacy, fiscal constraints and policy choices steadily eroded these provisions. By the early 2000s, state salaries were insufficient to secure basic subsistence, public services deteriorated, and employment opportunities contracted, particularly in rural areas (Ilkhamov 2001; Kandiyoti 1998). As the state retreated from everyday welfare provision, households increasingly relied on family networks,

kinship ties, and neighbourhood institutions to absorb economic shocks and resolve disputes (Rasanayagam 2002; Sievers 2002; Urinboyev 2013).

Among these institutions, the mahalla played a particularly significant role. Operating as a local community structure, the mahalla mediated access to resources, resolved conflicts, and enforced social norms through moral pressure rather than formal sanction (Dadabaev 2012; Sievers 2002; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022). Its authority derived not from codified law but from social legitimacy, reputation, and embeddedness in everyday life (Urinboyev 2025). While formally incorporated into the state's administrative framework, the mahalla functioned according to normative logics that frequently diverged from state law. Decisions prioritised social harmony, hierarchy, and mutual obligation over individual rights or procedural legality.

These developments produced a plural legal landscape in which citizens navigated between overlapping normative orders. Formal law, community expectations, religious norms, and pragmatic survival strategies co-existed, often in tension with one another (Urinboyev 2014). In practice, individuals selectively mobilised these frameworks depending on context, power relations, and perceived risk. This pluralism did not imply the absence of law, but rather its fragmentation across multiple sites of authority. Legality was constructed through everyday negotiation rather than imposed uniformly from above.

Within this context, corruption must be understood not merely as a legal pathology but as a mode of governance embedded in political and economic structures (Urinboyev and Svensson 2013a, 2017). During the Karimov era, corruption structured relations between political elites, bureaucrats, and economic actors, facilitating access to markets, protection from inspection, and control over resources (Lewis 2016). Patron-client networks linked local officials to regional and national power brokers, producing a system in which loyalty and informal exchange were often more consequential than formal competence or legality (Ilkhamov 2000, 2007).

At the everyday level, petty corruption functioned as a coping mechanism within a system characterised by low wages, bureaucratic obstruction, and limited access to services (Coudouel et al. 1998; Johnson 2014; Kamp 2004). Informal payments were frequently framed as expressions of gratitude or moral obligation rather than bribes, blurring the line between corruption and socially sanctioned reciprocity (Rasanayagam 2011a; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013b; Wegerich 2006). Enforcement

campaigns targeting corruption were selective and politicised, reinforcing perceptions that legality was contingent and instrumental (Lewis 2016). This further undermined trust in formal institutions and strengthened reliance on informal norms as more predictable guides for action (Urinboyev and Svensson 2024).

The transition following Karimov's death in 2016 introduced a significant discursive shift. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the state openly acknowledged systemic corruption and launched an ambitious reform agenda emphasising transparency, accountability, and service delivery (Anceschi 2019; Marszewski 2018; Pannier 2017). Dozens of new laws were adopted, specialised institutions were created, and anti-corruption became a central theme of official rhetoric, leading some international observers to interpret these developments as evidence of meaningful transformation (Sever 2018).

Yet, despite the proliferation of legal and institutional reforms, the underlying structures of informal governance proved remarkably resilient (Lasslett 2019, 2020a, 2020b). While some bureaucratic practices became more customer-oriented and public discourse briefly expanded, the gap between law on the books and law in action remained substantial. Citizens continued to rely on personal networks and informal brokerage to resolve everyday problems (Mustafoev 2020; Urinboyev 2024). Complaint mechanisms often redirected grievances back to the same local officials accused of misconduct, reinforcing cynicism about formal accountability (Urinboyev and Svensson 2024).

These dynamics reflect a broader pattern of authoritarian modernisation rather than a transition to rule-of-law governance (Anceschi 2018, 2019). Reforms have focused on economic liberalisation, administrative efficiency, and international reputation, while leaving core power relations largely intact. Anti-corruption institutions operate within hierarchical political structures that limit their autonomy, particularly in relation to elite-level corruption (Lasslett 2020b; Rickleton 2023; Urinboyev and Svensson 2024). As a result, enforcement tends to target petty corruption while systemic practices remain unaddressed.

The rapid expansion of legislation has also generated legal complexity and uncertainty (Urinboyev 2024). New rules co-exist with old practices, producing overlapping and sometimes contradictory normative expectations. For street-level officials and ordinary citizens, navigating this environment requires situational judgement rather than strict legal compliance. Informal norms continue to provide practical guidance where formal law

is ambiguous, selectively enforced, or disconnected from lived realities (Urinboyev and Dogan 2023).

Uzbekistan thus exemplifies the contradictions inherent in post-Soviet legal landscapes (Hendley 2009; Ledeneva 1998; Solomon 2008). The state continuously produces new laws and institutions, yet governance remains deeply reliant on tacit norms, improvisation, and situational accommodation. This co-existence of formality and informality is not a temporary dysfunction but a stable equilibrium shaped by political economy, social structure, and historical legacies (Urinboyev 2024).

For anti-corruption policy, these findings carry significant implications. Reforms that focus exclusively on institutional design, legal transplantation, or punitive enforcement risk misdiagnosing the problem. In Uzbekistan, legality is constructed and enacted within hybrid social orders where everyday moral logics often override written norms (Urinboyev 2023; Urinboyev and Ibragimov 2025). Effective reform therefore cannot be imposed from institutional altitude alone. It must engage with the lived experiences, normative expectations, and survival strategies that shape how law is understood and practised (Urinboyev and Svensson 2024).

By foregrounding these dynamics, Uzbekistan offers a powerful lens through which broader Central Asian patterns of legal pluralism and governance under uncertainty can be observed. It demonstrates that the true terrain of reform lies not solely in statutes or agencies, but in the everyday interactions where legality acquires meaning. Any serious attempt to combat corruption and strengthen the rule of law must begin from this terrain, recognising hybridity not as an obstacle to reform, but as its unavoidable starting point. This analytical stance necessitates a theoretical framework capable of capturing how law is produced, interpreted, and enacted beyond formal institutions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To address this challenge, this chapter draws on two interrelated socio-legal perspectives—legal pluralism (Griffiths 1986; Merry 1988; Tamanaha 2000) and the concept of living law (Ehrlich 1912; Ehrlich et al. 2002)—to analyse why corruption and informal governance remain resilient in Uzbekistan despite decades of formal rule-of-law and anti-corruption reforms. These frameworks make it possible to move beyond legal-centralistic and institution-focused analyses and instead examine how citizens actually navigate the multiple, overlapping normative worlds that

structure everyday life. Such an approach reveals that the legal landscape in Uzbekistan is not defined by formal state law alone, but by a dense interplay of informal norms, communal (mahalla) obligations, moral expectations, and pragmatic survival strategies.

At the heart of the legal pluralism perspective is the recognition that multiple normative systems co-exist and interact within a single social field (Griffiths 1986; Moore 1973; von Benda-Beckmann 2002). In Uzbekistan, these normative layers include state law, Islamic values, Soviet administrative logics, and mahalla-based communal ethics (Dadabaev 2014; Urinboyev 2023, 2025). Each provides a different template for resolving disputes, allocating resources, maintaining social order, and understanding appropriate conduct. Far from being mutually exclusive, these normative orders overlap, collide, and sometimes reinforce one another. Citizens become adept at switching between them depending on the situation, social audience, or institutional setting. A person might rely on official legislation when interacting with a court, invoke Islamic principles when negotiating family matters, mobilise Soviet-era bureaucratic routines for problem-solving, and adhere to mahalla expectations in matters of reciprocity and mutual aid. Legal pluralism, therefore, is not an abstract academic construct—it is a daily navigational act, akin to choosing the right language or tone for the right audience (Urinboyev and Dogan 2023; Urinboyev and Svensson 2024).

This perspective is complemented by the notion of living law—the set of social norms that actually regulate everyday behaviour regardless of what written statutes prescribe (Banakar 2008; Ehrlich 1912). In Uzbekistan, as in many post-colonial societies, these “living” norms often have greater legitimacy, usability, and persuasive power than formal legal rules. Living law emerges from shared moral codes, expectations of reciprocity, obligations to kin and mahalla, and collective memories of scarcity and collective survival (Dadabaev 2013; Sievers 2002; Urinboyev 2013, 2017). These norms are continually made and remade through practice; they are dynamic, fluid, and situational. Rather than being fixed or codified, living law improvises—adapting to new constraints, economic pressures, and political environments. It is the improvised jazz playing beneath the formal symphony of state law and governance.

Together, legal pluralism and living law highlight the porous divide between “formal” and “informal” practices. In everyday life, people do not experience this divide as a binary. Instead, they routinely stitch together formal rules and informal norms to solve problems, navigate

institutions, and secure outcomes. A person may submit the required documents for a state service (formal compliance) while simultaneously contacting a personal acquaintance inside the bureaucracy to expedite the process (informal brokerage). These hybrid strategies do not necessarily signal resistance to the state; rather, they constitute a rational response to the unpredictability, shortages, and bureaucratic complexities that have historically shaped governance in the region (Dadabaev 2004; Luong 2002; Staples 1993).

A key dimension of this framework concerns the moral logics behind informal exchanges. Contrary to global anti-corruption discourse—which tends to evaluate all extra-legal exchanges as pathological—Uzbek citizens often differentiate between morally legitimate and morally problematic forms of informal transactions (Ruziev and Midmore 2014; Urinboyev 2019; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013a). A gift given to a teacher or doctor may be an expression of gratitude, respect, or social duty—an attempt to maintain relational balance—rather than a corrupt attempt to distort outcomes (Urinboyev and Svensson 2014). Such gestures signify belonging, solidarity, and mutual recognition. They participate in a long-standing moral economy where relationships, not transactions, define the value of the exchange.

Local actors commonly distinguish between moral reciprocity and predatory extraction (Urinboyev and Svensson 2024). Moral reciprocity consists of exchanges rooted in social obligation, hospitality, and collective memory. These forms of informality are broadly accepted, even expected, as they sustain community trust and social cohesion. Predatory extraction, on the other hand, refers to coercive demands, exploitative bribery, or abuse of authority for personal gain. These practices are widely resented and condemned, even when individuals feel compelled to participate in them to secure essential services. Understanding this moral distinction is crucial, because it demonstrates that “corruption” from an external perspective does not always align with local moral categories. It also shows why anti-corruption campaigns that indiscriminately criminalise all informal exchanges risk undermining social bonds and eroding the “living law” that enables daily life to function.

Ultimately, legal pluralism and living law provide the conceptual tools to understand why formal anti-corruption reforms often fail to take root in Uzbekistan. People operate within hybrid legalities—part state law, part community norm, part survival strategy—and their practical orientations toward governance are shaped by moral logics that frequently override

written rules. This chapter therefore argues that anti-corruption efforts cannot succeed unless they meaningfully engage the informal orders and moral economies through which people actually navigate institutional and bureaucratic uncertainties.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic research design to examine how corruption, informality, and legality are produced and negotiated in everyday governance practices in Uzbekistan. Rather than treating corruption as a measurable institutional deficit or legality as a fixed set of formal rules, the methodology is designed to capture how law is lived, interpreted, and enacted across plural normative environments. The research strategy is therefore oriented toward understanding governance from the standpoint of everyday practice, moral reasoning, and relational interaction, consistent with this chapter's theoretical grounding in legal pluralism and living law.

Empirical material was generated through long-term, immersive fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2009 and 2023, amounting to approximately twenty months of cumulative in-country research. Fieldwork was carried out across two primary sites: Tashkent, the country's political and administrative centre, and the Fergana Valley, a densely populated region where informal institutions, mahalla norms, and moral economies remain especially salient. This multi-sited design made it possible to trace governance practices across macro-, meso-, and micro-level arenas, linking central-level reform discourse and institutional design to street-level implementation and everyday social life.

Research in Tashkent focused on formal governance settings and reform infrastructures. Data collection combined participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and case-based analyses of corruption-related encounters in institutional environments where citizens routinely interact with the state. These included schools, hospitals, universities, tax offices, traffic police units, inspection agencies, and anti-corruption-related events and conferences. Interviews were conducted with legal professionals, prosecutors, civil servants, policymakers, anti-corruption experts, journalists, and academic researchers. These interactions provided insight into how anti-corruption reforms are understood from within the state, how global governance templates are translated into domestic practice, and how officials themselves navigate the gap between

legal mandates and institutional constraints. Particular attention was paid to moments of ambiguity, discretion, and selective enforcement, which reveal how informality operates as a governance mechanism rather than an administrative failure.

Fieldwork in the Fergana Valley relied primarily on embedded observation and informal interviewing within the rhythms of rural and semi-rural life. Research was conducted in public and semi-public social spaces such as *guzar* (community gathering points), *choyxona* (teahouses), mosques, mahalla meetings, and life-cycle ceremonies, including weddings, funerals, circumcisions, and commemorative gatherings. These settings functioned as key sites of moral communication and social regulation, where residents collectively interpret state authority, evaluate officials' behaviour, circulate reputational information, and negotiate communal obligations. Such arenas provided access to the micro-social processes through which informal governance is reproduced: gift economies, reciprocal assistance, gossip and moral sanctioning, dispute mediation, and the everyday calibration of acceptable versus unacceptable practices.

The study draws on a broad and heterogeneous pool of interlocutors rather than a closed set of formal interviewees. Participants included mahalla leaders involved in local administration and mediation; religious figures offering moral guidance; entrepreneurs engaged in formal and informal economic activity; street-level bureaucrats and their family members; and women who play central roles in organising ritual life, managing gift exchanges, and arbitrating household and neighbourhood relations. Equally important were the contributions of ordinary residents, whose everyday conversations, stories, and evaluations constituted a critical source of data. Because much of this interaction occurred in open social spaces and through repeated encounters over time, the empirical material reflects a wide spectrum of voices and experiences rather than elite perspectives alone.

Across both sites, the research generated a dense body of ethnographic material capturing how formal law is invoked, ignored, bent, or operationalised through informal means. This includes narratives of encounters with police, inspectors, teachers, doctors, and administrators; descriptions of bureaucratic trajectories; accounts of informal problem-solving; and moral commentaries on corruption and fairness. Rather than treating these accounts as isolated anecdotes, the analysis situates them within broader patterns of social organisation and normative reasoning, allowing for comparison across settings and scales. This approach makes visible how

citizens distinguish between morally sanctioned reciprocity and predatory extraction, how informal networks function as mechanisms of access and enforcement, and how anti-corruption reforms are selectively appropriated, resisted, or neutralised in practice.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Given the political sensitivity of corruption-related topics, particular care was taken to protect interlocutors' anonymity and safety. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms, and identifying details regarding locations, institutions, and individuals have been altered or omitted. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their involvement. The long-term, relational nature of the fieldwork also enabled the gradual building of trust, which was essential for accessing candid reflections on informal practices and moral judgement.

Methodologically, the study does not seek statistical representativeness or causal generalisation. Instead, it aims for analytical depth and theoretical insight by illuminating the social logics through which governance actually functions. Ethnography is employed not simply as a descriptive tool, but as an analytical strategy that reveals the moral architectures, relational infrastructures, and hybrid legal orders underpinning everyday governance. In doing so, the methodology directly supports this chapter's central claim: that corruption and informality in Uzbekistan cannot be understood—or addressed—without close attention to lived practice, moral reasoning, and the plural normative environments in which law acquires meaning.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: THE MORAL ARCHITECTURE OF EVERYDAY GOVERNANCE

This section draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in urban and rural Uzbekistan to examine how corruption, informality, and legality are experienced and evaluated in everyday practice. Rather than treating rule-of-law gaps as institutional failures, the empirical data demonstrates a plural and hybrid legal landscape in which legality is rarely binary and distinctions between corruption, reciprocity, obligation, kinship duty, and pragmatic survival are continuously negotiated through social interaction and moral reasoning. Across macro-, meso-, and micro-level arenas, we will show (1) how ceremonial life, gift economies, and routine exchanges shape expectations of authority and justice, including cases where informal

channels are used to realise outcomes formally guaranteed by law; (2) how everyday resistance to corruption and hybrid legality operate as lived navigational practices through which actors distinguish morally legitimate from illegitimate informality while selectively mobilising legal rules, personal networks, and moral claims; and (3) how informality functions as a constitutive feature of governance embedded within reform processes, institutional routines, and political-economic relations rather than operating at their margins. All in all, the empirical data will demonstrate that legality in Uzbekistan is produced through everyday practice within plural normative orders, and that approaches to corruption and reform focused solely on formal institutions overlook the moral and relational infrastructures through which law acquires practical authority and governance becomes workable.

Ceremonial Life, Mahalla Solidarity, and Hybrid Legal Orders in Everyday Governance

Ritual, Obligation, and Moral Visibility

In many parts of Uzbekistan, weddings, circumcision ceremonies, funerals, and other life-cycle rituals serve as dense social gatherings in which the core moral architecture of the community becomes visible. These events function not only as celebrations but also as arenas where reciprocity is enacted, social hierarchies are affirmed, and the moral value of giving is performed publicly. They are moments when everyday expectations—often implicit, diffuse, and rarely articulated—are brought into sharp relief. In these ceremonial settings, people learn how obligation works, how reputation is produced and damaged, and how social membership is sustained over time. What is at stake in such rituals is not merely celebration, but the reproduction of a normative order through which everyday governance is made possible.

The Social and Economic Context of Shabboda

The ethnographic material that follows is drawn from long-term fieldwork conducted in a village we call Shabboda, located in the Fergana Valley of eastern Uzbekistan. With a population of more than 18,000 residents, Shabboda is administratively organised into 28 mahalla (neighbourhood

communities), each comprising between 150 and 300 immediate families (oilalar), themselves embedded within extended kinship groups (urug'). These overlapping social associations—the mahalla, the urug', and the oila—constitute the primary arenas through which everyday life, social obligation, and moral judgement are organised. Rather than functioning as discrete or hierarchical units, they form an interlocking social infrastructure that structures access to resources, shapes reputations, and mediates relations with the state.

Economically, Shabboda's residents rely on a diverse and often precarious mix of income sources: small-scale agriculture (particularly cucumbers, grapes, and apricots), livestock rearing, informal trade, construction work, seasonal wage labour, and, crucially, remittances from migrant workers in Russia and Kazakhstan. Almost every household has at least one member who has worked abroad at some point in the last decade. Migration income sustains daily consumption, finances weddings, and pays for medical treatment, but it also introduces new vulnerabilities—legal precarity abroad, sudden deportation, or unpaid wages. In this context, mahalla-based solidarity functions as a form of social insurance that partially substitutes for absent state protections.

Villagers often explained this succinctly: "The law is written in Tashkent, but life is lived here." This phrase captures a widespread perception that formal state law exists at a distance, while everyday order is produced locally. Governance in Shabboda is therefore experienced not as a single, coherent system, but as a plural legal landscape in which multiple normative orders co-exist. State law, Islamic moral reasoning, Soviet administrative habits, and mahalla norms overlap, compete, and are selectively mobilised depending on context. People do not choose between these systems abstractly; they navigate them pragmatically, drawing on whichever framework offers the most predictable or legitimate outcome.

Daily social life in Shabboda unfolds in shared public spaces that function simultaneously as arenas of sociability and sites of informal governance. The guzar serves as a communal meeting point where announcements are made, disputes are discussed, and collective decisions are signalled. The masjid provides not only religious guidance but moral commentary on everyday conduct. The choyxona operates as a space of male sociability where news circulates rapidly and reputations are assessed. Women's social interactions occur largely through household visits, street-side conversations, collective cooking, and participation in life-cycle rituals. These everyday encounters constitute what socio-legal scholars

describe as living law (Ehrlich 1912)—norms that regulate behaviour regardless of what formal statutes prescribe.

In Shabboda, social control rarely takes the form of formal sanction. Instead, it operates through moral pressure, ridicule, loss of respect, and the threat of exclusion from communal life. Villagers frequently invoke local idioms emphasising honour (or-nomus), reputation (obro'), and keeping one's word (lafz). To lose money is unfortunate; to lose reputation is devastating. These values are not symbolic abstractions. They shape access to labour, credit, marriage prospects, and assistance in times of crisis. A person who repeatedly violates communal expectations may find themselves formally within the law, yet socially isolated and practically unsupported.

Weddings as the Central Arena of Moral Accounting

Life-cycle events—above all weddings—are the most visible arenas in which this living law is enacted and assessed. Weddings in Shabboda are not family affairs but collective events, routinely attended by four to five hundred guests drawn from across the mahalla, kinship (oila, urug') networks, workplaces, and other networks of belonging (e.g., former classmates). They are moments of heightened visibility in which obligations, hierarchies, and moral expectations are publicly displayed and scrutinised. It is within this dense social setting that the co-existence of multiple normative orders—state law, religious ethics, community norms, and pragmatic survival strategies—becomes most apparent.

In Shabboda, weddings do not begin on the wedding day. They begin weeks or months earlier, in conversations at the guzar, in quiet assessments exchanged among women, and in the careful moral arithmetic through which families remember who stood by them in moments of need. A woman preparing for her daughter's wedding explained: "We already know who will come and who will not. We remember who helped us before." By the time the wedding takes place, much of its meaning has already been negotiated. What unfolds during the ceremony itself is not merely celebration, but confirmation—of relationships, obligations, and social standing.

Until recently, weddings were organised almost entirely inside household courtyards within the mahalla. The mahalla itself owned wedding tables, chairs, and large qozon (cauldrons), which were rented to the wedding host for a symbolic fee. This arrangement ensured inclusion: even

families with limited resources could host weddings without falling outside accepted norms. Musicians arrived with their own instruments and loudspeakers. Preparing for the wedding was a collective endeavour—men cooked pilaf together at dawn, women coordinated rituals and gift exchanges, children ran errands between houses. The wedding unfolded inside the mahalla, making visible that marriage was not a private contract but a collective social undertaking.

In recent years, many families have shifted weddings to banquet halls known as *toyhona*. These halls offer convenience and relief from physical labour, and sometimes signal modernity or success. Yet villagers consistently emphasised that the moral substance of the wedding remains unchanged. “The place has changed,” one elder explained, “but the obligations are the same.” The persistence of ritual forms across changing spaces illustrates a central feature of legal pluralism: norms are not anchored in institutions alone, but travel across settings, adapting without losing authority.

The wedding day begins before sunrise with *nahor oshi*, the morning pilaf. Men arrive in small groups at the host’s gate, politely greeting one another as they enter the courtyard. The atmosphere is restrained, solemn, and respectful. Guests—neighbours, relatives, former classmates, work-mates—greet the head of the household with a firm handshake. As their hands meet, each guest discreetly takes folded banknotes from his pocket and presses the money into the host’s palm. The exchange is swift and unobtrusive, embedded in the act of greeting itself. There is no envelope, no tray, no visible transaction.

The host does not count the money. This absence of counting is deliberate. Everyone present knows the standard *toyana*: an amount equivalent to the price of one kilo of meat (*bir kilo go’shtlik toyana*). Although inflation changes the nominal sum, the moral value remains constant. People remember not how much cash was given, but that *bir kilo go’shtlik toyana* was fulfilled. Years later, when obligations are returned, the same unit of value applies. This practice stabilises reciprocity across time and insulates obligation from economic volatility. It exemplifies living law in action: a norm that regulates behaviour effectively without formal enforcement.

Seating during *nahor oshi* quietly reproduces hierarchy. The most respected guests—officials, entrepreneurs, elders with strong reputations—are seated at the best tables. Their presence signals honour for the host family and access to assistance in the future. Conversation is polite but observant. Who arrived early? Who did not come? Who sent excuses?

These details circulate later through the mahalla's information networks. Memory, rather than documentation, functions as the archive of obligation.

In the afternoon, the wedding enters its more expressive phase with the xotinlar bazmi (women's feast). Despite its name, this is not an exclusively female event. Men and women attend together, though they sit at separate tables. What distinguishes the xotinlar bazmi is the central role played by women. Women organise the ceremony, coordinate gifts, guide the ritual sequence, and evaluate conduct. Their authority is practical and moral, grounded in intimate knowledge of family histories and past exchanges.

It is during the xotinlar bazmi that music begins. Musicians play, singers perform, and guests dance. Status becomes publicly legible. If an ordinary villager dances, applause is brief. When a person of influence steps forward, the crowd gathers. Men line up to press banknotes into the dancer's hand or slip them discreetly into his doppi (traditional Uzbek hat), a ritual known as pul qistirish ("pinching money"). The amount matters less than the visibility of the gesture. This is respect enacted publicly, loyalty displayed before witnesses. Money collected during dancing is later given to musicians, converting symbolic recognition into labour compensation.

Alongside dancing, women exchange gifts—gifts, money, textiles, sweets, household goods. These exchanges are prolonged and socially dense. Women linger, talk, assess the bride, comment on the household, and reaffirm bonds among kin and neighbours. Exact amounts are rarely discussed. Instead, gifts are evaluated morally: "she gave well," "she showed respect," "she did not fall short." These judgements shape future access to support and inclusion.

From Ceremony to Everyday Solidarity

The financial burden of weddings is immense. Families save for years, borrow money, and rely on loans. Yet villagers reject the idea that weddings are wasteful. They describe them as investments in social infrastructure. Money collected through toyana circulates back into the community, financing future ceremonies, medical emergencies, funerals, and migration costs. What appears excessive from a formal economic perspective functions locally as redistribution and risk management.

When the wedding ends, the obligations activated during the ceremony do not disappear. They settle into everyday life within the mahalla, where they are sustained, monitored, and occasionally contested. Solidarity is enacted through funerals, hashar (collective voluntary labour), shared

food, informal loans, and dispute mediation. Participation is expected; refusal requires justification.

Funerals are particularly revealing. When a death occurs, the mahalla mobilises immediately. Women bring food, men organise logistics, neighbours contribute money quietly. Presence matters more than amount. Absence is remembered. Everyday life and social order is enacted through collective action and moral obligation.

Hashar follows a similar logic. When a road needs repairing, a canal (ariq) cleaning, or a household rebuilding after illness or fire, residents are expected to contribute labour, tools, or money. Contributions are calibrated to capacity. The elderly and very poor are exempted, but only if their exemption is morally legible. Repeated absence without justification damages reputation.

Disputes—over land boundaries, debts, or family conflicts—are typically addressed first through mahalla mediation. Elders or respected figures intervene, invoking fairness, history, and social harmony. Formal courts are approached only when these mechanisms fail. Even then, legal action is often accompanied by informal negotiation, reflecting a hybrid legal order in which state law is one option among several.

Religious idioms—savob, ehson, halol, harom—provide ethical justification for these practices. Wealth is judged not solely by legality but by circulation. An official who accumulates wealth through illegal and corrupt means but redistributes generously within the mahalla may be morally tolerated; one who hoards is condemned. This distinction reveals the co-existence of multiple legal orders: state law defines corruption in legal terms, while community norms evaluate it through moral criteria of reciprocity and obligation.

This moral reasoning also shapes everyday encounters with the state. Informal payments framed as gratitude are acceptable; demands made in advance are condemned as predatory. Such distinctions are rooted in living law, not statutory codes.

Policing, Inspection, and the Everyday Navigation of Hybrid Law

The moral logics that structure weddings and mahalla solidarity do not remain confined to ceremonial life. They travel into everyday encounters with the state, shaping how villagers interpret, negotiate, and respond to formal authority. Nowhere is this more visible than in interactions with

police and inspectors—encounters that place state law and living law into direct contact.

One afternoon in Shabboda, we accompanied a local entrepreneur, Akmal, as he drove his old Daewoo Nexia to the district centre. Akmal runs a small workshop repairing agricultural equipment, operating largely in cash and informal arrangements. On the main road, a traffic police officer signalled him to pull over. The officer asked for documents: driver's licence, registration, insurance. Akmal complied calmly, handing over the papers.

The officer leafed through them slowly, lingering on a minor discrepancy—insurance expired two weeks earlier. Under formal law, the offence was clear. A fine could be issued; the vehicle could even be impounded. Yet neither man spoke in legalistic terms. Instead, the interaction shifted immediately into a different register. "Brother," the officer said, "you know how things are." Akmal nodded. "I know. I was busy. My son's wedding is coming." The officer paused, then asked quietly, "Where is the wedding?" "In Shabboda," Akmal replied. "You should come."

This exchange illustrates legal pluralism in practice. The written law existed, but it was not the only—or even primary—normative framework guiding action. The conversation moved seamlessly from formal legality to social embeddedness. The reference to the wedding was not an excuse; it was a moral claim, situating Akmal within the shared economy of obligation.

The officer returned the documents. No ticket was issued. Instead, he said, "Fix it soon. And may the wedding go well." As we drove away, Akmal explained matter-of-factly: "If he wanted, he could punish me. But he knows that a wedding is expensive and that I need more money these days. We live among people."

Importantly, Akmal did not experience this interaction as an instance of illegality resulting from the traffic police's failure to enforce the law. The resolution rested on mutual recognition and a shared moral context. Had the officer demanded a bribe in exchange for ignoring the minor infraction, Akmal would have described it as *poraxo'rlik*—predatory corruption. Instead, the encounter was framed as *odamgarchilik* (humaneness), an exercise of discretion embedded within a relational order.

Similar dynamics emerge during inspections. Local shopkeepers described routine visits by tax inspectors, fire safety officers, and sanitary authorities. Formal compliance is difficult: regulations are complex,

frequently changing, and inconsistently enforced. Shopkeepers therefore prepare not only documents, but relationships.

One woman who runs a small grocery store explained: “When they come, you don’t argue about the law. You show respect. You offer tea. You talk. They already know what they will do.”

Inspectors, for their part, often frame their actions through moral reasoning rather than legal abstraction. One former district inspector explained: “If I strictly follow the law, half the businesses must close. Who will feed their children then? The law is not blind; it must see life.”

These statements do not indicate ignorance of law. Rather, they reflect the operation of hybrid legality, in which state law is one normative reference among several. Inspectors weigh legality against social consequences, reputational risk, and social expectations. Enforcement becomes situational, negotiated, and morally justified.

This hybridity is not accidental; it is structurally produced. Low salaries, bureaucratic complexity, and political pressure combine to make strict legality impractical. Informal resolution offers efficiency and predictability. Yet these practices persist not merely because institutions are weak, but because they align with deeply embedded moral economies.

Ordinary people in rural Fergana themselves actively participate in this system. When facing a problem—obtaining documents, resolving fines, dealing with inspections—they rarely invoke law alone. Instead, they mobilise networks, reputations, and reciprocal obligations accumulated over years. A neighbour calls a cousin; a mahalla elder intervenes; a respected figure vouches. These actions are not seen as subverting law, but as making it workable.

At the same time, our informants drew clear moral boundaries. Predatory behaviour—unjustified demands, humiliation, extraction without reciprocity—is condemned. Stories of abusive officers circulate quickly in rural Fergana, damaging reputations. “People talk,” one man explained. “You cannot hide in the mahalla.”

Linking Ceremony, Mahalla, and Governance

Seen together, wedding rituals, mahalla solidarity, and encounters with police and inspectors form a single normative field. Ceremonial exchange and everyday governance are not separate domains but different intensities of the same plural legal order. What is enacted publicly at weddings is

enforced quietly in daily life. Obligation circulates across contexts, linking ritual generosity to mundane survival.

This integrated vignette speaks directly to this chapter's hypotheses. Formal anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms fail not because people reject legality, but because reforms operate at the level of institutions while ignoring the living law through which legality is actually constructed and enacted. Informal governance persists not because institutions are absent, but because mahalla-based norms offer predictability, legitimacy, and social security that formal law often cannot.

Understanding this hybridity reveals the true terrain of governance. Law does not reside only in statutes or agencies; it lives in everyday practices, moral judgements, and social relationships. Any meaningful reform must begin from this terrain, recognising legal pluralism not as an obstacle to be eliminated, but as the unavoidable starting point for governance in practice.

Informality, Resistance, and Hybrid Legality in Citizen–State Interactions

In the preceding empirical section, the analysis focused on ceremonial life, mahalla solidarity, and hybrid legal orders in everyday governance, examining how non-state social interactions—rituals, gift economies, communal obligations, and moral evaluations—structure legality and authority at the local level. That discussion demonstrated how living law operates through social relations and moral economies that exist largely outside formal state institutions, yet profoundly shape governance outcomes.

This section shifts the analytical focus from predominantly non-state arenas to everyday interactions between citizens and state officials, examining how informality functions as an integral mode of governance in Uzbekistan. Drawing on ethnographic observations, interview material, and case-based vignettes from a range of institutional settings, the analysis explores how citizens and officials navigate hybrid legal orders in routine encounters with the state. By situating citizen–state interactions within the same moral and relational frameworks discussed earlier, the section shows how informality, discretion, and negotiated compliance continue to mediate governance practices, blurring the boundary between formal authority and everyday social norms.

Informality as a Mode of Governance

In the reformist vocabulary of post-2016 Uzbekistan, governance is expected to become legible through formal procedures: digital portals, budget transparency initiatives, performance indicators, anti-corruption campaigns, and newly created institutions. Official discourse emphasises rationalisation, accountability, and institutional capacity. Yet in the everyday political economy of implementation, governance frequently operates through a different infrastructure—one that is largely undocumented, relational, and quietly compulsory. Informality here does not sit at the margins of the state; it is woven into how policy is enacted and how institutions function under constraint.

A revealing entry point into this dynamic is not a village ritual or a roadside interaction, but an international “good governance” conference in Tashkent. During fieldwork conducted after Islam Karimov’s death in September 2016, the research team attended a high-profile conference on anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms. The event featured a lavish gala dinner with live music, celebrity performers, and the choreography of prestige that often accompanies institutional self-presentation in reform contexts. Months later, during fieldwork in a remote village in the Fergana Valley, the researchers encountered Azim, a local entrepreneur involved in cross-border agricultural trade. What proved striking was not only that Azim knew the name of the hotel where the conference had taken place, but that he described in detail the food served at the gala dinner. He then explained that he had paid for the conference lunches and dinners—effectively acting as an “invisible funder” of a state-led anti-corruption event.

Azim’s account reveals an informal fiscal architecture that shadows formal state capacity. Central institutions issue policy mandates “from above” without allocating sufficient resources to implement them, while lower-level bodies are nonetheless expected to perform reform. The resulting gap is routinely bridged through informal alliances between state institutions and business actors. These arrangements do not appear in official budgets, yet they are widely understood as part of “how things work.” Informality here is not a residual deviation from the state; it is a mode of governance actively induced by the state itself. By outsourcing costs to private actors, institutions are able to perform compliance with reform agendas while implicitly granting those actors future access, exemptions, or protection.

A second episode from the same village extends this logic from reform spectacle to mundane infrastructure. In principle, rural roads are to be improved through presidential programmes such as Prosperous Village/Mahalla or through citizen-led participatory budgeting initiatives like Open Budget/My Road, where residents mobilise votes to secure funding. Yet in Beshkapa mahalla, one road was asphalted through neither formal channel. Villagers explained that the project was realised because one household had a close relative working in the General Prosecutor's Office, whose responsibilities included oversight of construction-sector legality. Maintaining good relations with this prosecutor mattered to the local roads committee; hierarchical influence translated into asphalt.

From the standpoint of orthodox anti-corruption doctrine, such an outcome resembles diversion of state resources. Locally, however, the interpretation was different. Villagers framed the asphalt as a public good to which they were already entitled as taxpayers, obtained through the channel that actually worked when formal procedures were slow, competitive, or politically rationed. This episode illustrates a core feature of legal pluralism in practice: state law remains present, but it is not the only normative order authorising action. Community moral reasoning—rights understood as lived entitlements, relational access as legitimate, and outcomes as the primary measure of fairness—co-exists with formal rules and often determines what counts as acceptable governance.

Seen through this chapter's theoretical framework, these cases demonstrate how living law and informal norms provide a functional grammar for governance under constraint. Informality here is not simply the exchange of envelopes; it is an institutional technology for making the system operate when budgets, mandates, and administrative capacity do not align. This directly supports this chapter's first hypothesis: formal reforms co-exist with, and are absorbed into, pre-existing informal systems because they do not displace the relational logics that actually organise compliance and delivery.

Everyday Resistance to Corruption

Resistance to corruption in authoritarian and hybrid political settings rarely takes the form of open confrontation. More often, it appears as calibrated boundary-work: distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable practices; selectively using new institutional openings; mobilising reputation, gossip, and communal sanction to discipline predation; and, at

times, insisting on law-abiding behaviour even when doing so carries social costs.

At the macro level of reform discourse, President Mirziyoyev's claim that "the state should serve its citizens" materialised in the creation of new grievance infrastructures, including the President's online virtual reception portal and regional halq qabulxonalari (people's reception centres). These mechanisms allow citizens to submit complaints about unlawful actions and corrupt officials. Ethnographically, their significance lies not in eliminating informality, but in expanding the repertoire of everyday resistance. Citizens acquire an additional channel for voicing grievances—an alternative to silent endurance, private payments, or purely local mediation.

More revealing, however, are the micro-social and moral forms of resistance that unfold within communities. In Shabboda's Oqtepa mahalla, everyday conversations at weddings and in the guzar contrasted two state officials: Sardor, a high-ranking provincial police deputy chief, and Rahmon, a district-level traffic policeman. Sardor, despite his elevated position, was widely criticised as a "communist"—a local term used to describe officials who strictly adhere to formal law but do not share their influence or resources with kin and mahalla networks. The critique was not simply envy; it was a claim about obligation. Residents recalled supporting Sardor's family before he attained legal and political influence and argued that he now owed assistance in return—sometimes as little as making a phone call to prevent neighbours from paying fines for minor traffic violations. In contrast, villagers frequently invoked Rahmon, a district-level traffic policeman, as an example of how public authority ought to be exercised. Though less influential than Sardor, he was widely respected for using his networks and administrative knowledge to help fellow villagers navigate bureaucratic difficulties and legal problems. Residents valued him not for providing material benefits but because they believed that social status and official authority entail obligations toward one's community. Rahmon thus embodied the normative expectations of mahalladoshlik, where authority is judged not only by formal legality but also by its contribution to collective welfare and mutual support. His reputation illustrates how local communities evaluate public officials through a moral framework that differs from the bureaucratic ideals underpinning formal anticorruption agendas.

This form of resistance is ambivalent. On the one hand, villagers condemn predatory extraction and arbitrary enforcement. On the other, they resist a cold, procedural state by demanding that officials translate their

power into community welfare—help with legal problems, protection from fine and sanctions, or assistance with local infrastructure. Such resistance does not align neatly with institutional anti-corruption agendas. It is grounded in living law, where mahalladoshlik (shared origin) and mutual aid constitute the moral backbone of social relations.

At the same time, resistance also takes the opposite form: refusal to comply with these communal expectations. Sardor “made his position clear,” drawing a sharp boundary between public office and private life. He became a “communist” in mahalla discourse, yet a *halol odam*—an honest man—in the eyes of his family and close kin, who respected his refusal to bend rules. This represents everyday resistance to informal obligation and a defence of legality, even when such a stance threatens reputation and social comfort.

These contrasting evaluations demonstrate that resistance to corruption is not a single practice but a contested social process. The same act—refusing to use influence—can be interpreted as moral failure in one normative order (mahalla living law) and moral integrity in another (state legality and kin-based ethics). This multiplicity resonates directly with this chapter’s central claim: legality is constructed within plural normative landscapes, and reform efforts that assume a unitary moral horizon risk misreading both corruption and resistance.

Hybrid Legality as a Lived Navigational Practice

Hybrid legality becomes most visible when examined not as an abstract institutional overlap, but as an embodied craft. It involves knowing when to speak the language of law, when to invoke moral obligation, which gesture signals respect, and which gesture triggers sanction. This lived navigation is captured with particular clarity in everyday encounters with traffic police.

To illustrate this dynamic, we draw on empirical insights from the Karimov era (1991–2016), when traffic enforcement was not yet digitalised and relied heavily on the physical presence and discretion of police officers on the roads. A minibus driver interviewed in 2011 described the practical arithmetic of roadside enforcement as follows: the official fine for speeding was 100,000 soum, yet the matter could typically be resolved by placing 15,000 soum inside the vehicle documents and handing them over with an apology. He did not describe this payment as *pora* (a bribe), but as a “gift” offered voluntarily. This distinction was morally significant, as it

separated practices framed as gratitude, respect, and mutual accommodation from those understood as predatory abuse. The driver also explained the broader political economy of enforcement: police positions were often purchased, officers were expected to meet monthly financial obligations to their superiors, salaries were insufficient, and informal payments functioned as a pragmatic adaptation that produced a “win-win” outcome for both parties.

Crucially, the navigational practice here is not simply paying money. It is knowing the genre of the exchange: how to embed money in documents, how to apologise, and how to name the act so that it remains within a locally tolerable moral frame. The driver explicitly linked roadside practices to ceremonial gift vocabularies, noting that Uzbek has multiple terms for “gift” depending on context—including *toyana*—and that the boundary between gift and bribe is fluid. Legal pluralism here operates not through parallel institutions, but through parallel moral-linguistic registers that people switch between with precision.

A second roadside episode from April 2009, also reflecting Karimov-era traffic law enforcement practices, underscores the vulnerability embedded in this form of navigation. On the Kamchik pass, a heavily guarded checkpoint zone, a driver asked passengers to unbuckle their seatbelts because seatbelts were uncommon and would mark someone as a foreigner, thereby attracting police attention. A Swedish passenger travelling in the same car as the first author of this chapter refused and later insisted on being present during a luggage check—an action that was entirely legal under Uzbek law. Yet this insistence was perceived as an open challenge to the policeman’s authority. To avoid confrontation with a foreigner, the officer redirected pressure onto the driver, who later reported angrily that he had been forced to pay 15,000 soum because the Swedish passenger failed to “show respect.”

This episode illustrates hybrid legality as lived vulnerability. The driver’s safety depends on reading not only formal law but also the unofficial hierarchy of police–citizen relations, where obedience and deference are expected. When formal legality is asserted in a way that violates living law, sanctions may not be legal, but they are materially real and disproportionately borne by the weaker party. These cases support this chapter’s second hypothesis: informal norms persist not merely because institutions are weak, but because they often provide more predictable, intelligible, and socially legible mechanisms for resolving problems than formal channels under selective enforcement.

Micro-level Enforcement Through Informal Channels

If the preceding vignettes demonstrate informality as governance and hybrid legality as navigation, micro-level cases reveal something even more challenging for institutional reform narratives: citizens and officials sometimes use informal channels to enforce entitlements that the law already promises or to deliver public goods when formal compliance pathways fail.

The Beshkapa road asphaltting case exemplifies this dynamic. Although formal programmes exist, the road was secured through relational leverage. Villagers interpreted this not as corruption, but as the use of nonlegal methods to enforce rights prescribed by law. When formal distribution is mediated by hierarchy and scarcity, informal influence becomes a mechanism of rights realisation. Informality thus functions as a redistribution technology—unequal and contingent, yet often more effective than formal petitioning.

A micro-case from Shabboda makes the contradiction explicit. Rahmon, the district traffic policeman, was praised not for strict legality but for acting as a bridge between high-level officials and ordinary residents—negotiating informal payments for jobs or university admissions and bending state rules to meet mahalla interests. Under anti-corruption law, such actions could constitute abuse of office. Under mahalla living law, they were not abuse of public office because they were not driven by greed and because reputational costs for wrongdoing are severe.

Informality, Power, and Corruption at the Centre

The dynamics of informality and hybrid legality documented in villages, mahallas, and street-level encounters are not peripheral to the Uzbek state; they are reproduced, institutionalised, and intensified at its centre. At the macro level, informality functions not as a breakdown of governance but as one of its organising principles. Central government institutions, ministries, public procurement systems, and elite business–state relations are structured through dense webs of unwritten rules that co-exist with, and frequently override, formal legal provisions. Rather than representing failures of implementation, these practices constitute a stable mode of governance in which legality is activated selectively, strategically, and hierarchically.

Across interviews with lawyers, policymakers, prosecutors, and anti-corruption specialists in Tashkent, a consistent diagnosis emerged:

Uzbekistan does not suffer from a lack of law, but from an excess of law combined with discretionary enforcement. Legal frameworks are extensive and continuously expanding, yet their application is uneven and interest-laden. Legality is widely experienced as instrumental rather than normative—mobilised when it serves power and suspended when it threatens it. From a socio-legal perspective, this reflects the operation of living law at the centre of the state: formal statutes co-exist with unwritten rules governing when, how, and against whom the law is applied.

This instrumentalisation of law is closely tied to the convergence of public administration and business. Despite formal prohibitions on civil servants engaging in entrepreneurial activity, officials routinely participate in economic ventures through proxy ownership, family members, or trusted associates. Practices commonly described as *kryshovanye*—the provision of protection by officials to businesses in exchange for loyalty or material benefit—function as informal regulatory mechanisms that stabilise expectations in an otherwise uncertain legal environment. Crucially, these arrangements are not external to the state; they are produced within it, forming hybrid legal orders in which formal law, political loyalty, and informal economic exchange are mutually constitutive.

Public procurement provides particularly clear illustrations of this hybridity. Tender procedures are governed by detailed legal frameworks that formally emphasise transparency and competition, yet in practice outcomes are frequently shaped by conflicts of interest, elite coordination, and informal brokerage. Ownership structures are obscured through relatives or intermediaries, tax privileges are selectively allocated, and enforcement remains highly uneven. Formally, contracts appear lawful; substantively, they reflect a redistribution of public resources along elite and relational lines. Such cases are widely known and discussed, yet rarely result in systematic accountability, reinforcing the perception that legality operates asymmetrically.

Personnel policy further entrenches these patterns. Although legal provisions regulate conflicts of interest, ethical conduct, and merit-based recruitment, appointments within the civil service are overwhelmingly shaped by loyalty (*sadoqat*), shared locality (*mahalliychilik*), kinship, and personal networks (*tanish-bilish*). Officials assemble trusted *komanda*—teams drawn from these relational ties—creating vertically integrated networks of mutual protection. Within such structures, law is subordinated to loyalty, and formal accountability mechanisms are neutralised by informal norms of silence, reciprocity, and protection.

The collapse of the Sardoba dam in 2020 crystallised these dynamics in dramatic fashion. Official investigations attributed the disaster to technical failures and operational errors, and criminal responsibility was assigned primarily to mid- and low-level actors. Yet public debate focused less on engineering details than on the deeper structure of responsibility: dense overlaps between state agencies and private contractors, procurement decisions shaped by kinship and loyalty rather than expertise, and the insulation of senior officials from accountability. The closed nature of the trial reinforced popular perceptions that law punishes the weak while shielding the powerful. In public discourse, the catastrophe came to symbolise selective enforcement rather than exceptional failure.

These macro-level practices are sustained by structural features of Uzbekistan's legal system. The rapid proliferation of laws, decrees, and by-laws has produced legal ambiguity rather than clarity. Overlapping and contradictory norms expand discretionary power for officials while increasing vulnerability for citizens and lower-level bureaucrats. In such an environment, informality becomes not an aberration but a necessity. Ambiguity enables the accumulation of latent violations—*kompromat*—that can be activated selectively if political loyalty falters. This produces fear-based compliance and discourages overt resistance, while simultaneously normalising everyday rule-bending as a rational survival strategy.

Taken together, these dynamics underscore a central insight of this chapter: informality at the centre is not a residual pathology but a governing logic. Hybrid legality structures elite accumulation, policy implementation, and institutional survival. Anti-corruption reforms that focus narrowly on legal design, digitalisation, or petty enforcement fail to disrupt these arrangements because they leave intact the informal architectures of power that determine how law is activated in practice. As long as elite-level conflicts of interest remain structurally protected and legality continues to function as an instrument of hierarchy rather than a constraint upon it, informality will persist as a rational, morally intelligible mode of governance.

This analysis reinforces this chapter's broader argument: corruption in Uzbekistan cannot be understood solely as individual deviance or institutional weakness. It is embedded in a political and moral economy in which living law at the centre authorises selective enforcement, legitimises informal accumulation, and shapes popular legal consciousness. Any meaningful anti-corruption strategy must therefore confront not only the visible

symptoms of informality but the relational power structures and moral logics that sustain it at the heart of the state.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter set out to explain why extensive rule-of-law and anti-corruption reforms in Uzbekistan have repeatedly failed to transform everyday governance practices. Rather than restating the empirical patterns already documented in earlier sections, this discussion distils the broader analytical implications of those findings. The central contribution of this chapter lies in demonstrating that corruption and informality cannot be adequately understood as institutional malfunctions or cultural deviations from a formal legal ideal. Instead, they are integral features of a historically sedimented governance order structured by legal pluralism, living law, and moral economies of obligation.

Empirically, this chapter shows that informal practices are not peripheral to the functioning of the state but constitutive of governance across scales. Informal exchanges, brokerage, discretionary enforcement, and relational access operate within citizen–state interactions as well as at the level of central political economy. These practices provide coordination, resource mobilisation, and problem-solving under conditions of administrative uncertainty, selective enforcement, and fiscal constraint. Rather than indicating the absence of governance, informality often supplies predictability where formal institutions cannot. A key empirical insight is that citizens and officials distinguish between morally legitimate forms of reciprocity and morally objectionable forms of predatory extraction. This distinction structures everyday judgements of fairness and wrongdoing, yet it is largely absent from dominant anti-corruption frameworks that collapse all extra-legal practices into a single category of illegality. By documenting how informal channels are frequently used to enforce entitlements already guaranteed by law, this chapter challenges the assumption that informality necessarily undermines legality.

Theoretically, the analysis advances socio-legal and political economy debates by treating legal pluralism and living law as central explanatory frameworks rather than peripheral concepts. Governance in Uzbekistan unfolds within a plural legal landscape where state law co-exists with communal obligation, moral reasoning, Soviet administrative legacies, and pragmatic survival strategies. Individuals do not experience this plurality as disorder; they navigate it through embodied, situational judgement.

Hybrid legality emerges as a stable mode of governance rather than a transitional anomaly. It explains why formal reforms are absorbed into existing informal systems rather than replacing them: new laws add another normative layer but do not displace the relational logics that organise compliance, enforcement, and access. From this perspective, corruption is not a fixed legal category but a socially produced phenomenon whose meaning depends on context, intent, power asymmetry, and moral evaluation.

These findings carry important implications for anti-corruption policy and legislative reform. Dominant reform approaches assume that corruption results from weak institutions, insufficient enforcement, or inadequate transparency, and that strengthening formal legal frameworks will mechanically alter behaviour. The evidence presented here suggests that this assumption is flawed. Policies that criminalise all informal interaction risk misdiagnosing the problem by targeting socially embedded practices while leaving systemic abuses of power untouched. Such approaches may erode social mechanisms of trust and cooperation without reducing predatory extraction. Moreover, reforms often overlook the fact that state institutions themselves are embedded in informal networks of loyalty, obligation, and protection. Laws governing conflicts of interest, asset declaration, or ethical conduct have limited impact when enforcement is selective and when compliance threatens entrenched political and economic arrangements. In these conditions, legal proliferation can increase discretionary power rather than constrain it.

The persistence of informality should therefore be understood not as resistance to legality but as rational adaptation to institutional volatility. Citizens continue to rely on personal networks and informal brokerage because these mechanisms remain more predictable and socially intelligible than newly introduced procedures whose durability and impartiality are uncertain. Informal practices thus function as diagnostic signals, pointing to where formal institutions fail to deliver fairness, access, or predictability. Effective reform would require reducing discretionary arbitrariness, simplifying administrative procedures, and ensuring consistent enforcement—conditions under which reliance on informal channels becomes less necessary. Crucially, reform must also engage with existing moral economies rather than attempting to override them through punitive measures alone.

Taken together, this chapter contributes to broader debates on governance in hybrid and authoritarian regimes by showing that corruption and informality are not merely technical problems to be solved through

institutional engineering. They are social phenomena embedded in historical experience, moral reasoning, and political economy. Understanding this embeddedness is essential for designing reforms that are both effective and legitimate. By shifting the analytical focus from institutional form to lived practice—from law on the books to legality as enacted (living law)—this chapter demonstrates that governance is produced not only in ministries and agencies but in everyday interactions where authority, obligation, and justice are negotiated.

The core argument, therefore, is one of recalibration rather than rejection. Informality should not be romanticised, but neither should it be treated as a residual obstacle to modern governance. Hybrid legality is the starting point, not the failure, of governance in practice. Anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms that ignore this reality are likely to remain symbolic and performative. Those that take seriously the moral logics and relational infrastructures through which people navigate institutions stand a far greater chance of producing meaningful and sustainable change.

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