Informal civil society initiatives in non-Western societies: mahallas in Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT
Despite the extensive literature on the nexus between civil society and democratization in non-democratic regimes, most existing scholarship focuses on politically oriented and claim-making civil society organizations. While these accounts provide useful insights, they appear to rely on Western-centric understandings of civil society. Undoubtedly, little space exists in non-democratic regimes within which civil society organizations may engage in overt political activism due to governmental restrictions. Notwithstanding these restrictions, there are politically less threatening social arenas, where it is possible to identify informally organized civil society initiatives with the potential to redefine and influence long-term state–society relations. This article argues that what we might think of as civil society initiatives in non-democratic regimes cannot be satisfactorily understood through the lens of Western-centric understandings of civil society. Instead, we should focus on informal civil society initiatives. These processes will be illustrated through the case study of mahalla institutions in Uzbekistan.

KEYWORD
mahalla; Uzbekistan; Central Asia; informality; civil society; non-democratic regimes

Introduction
A prevailing assumption is that civil society organizations are pivotal to bringing about democratic transformations in non-democratic regimes (Putnam 1993). Such global discourses gained momentum following the collapse of the communist regimes, which paved the way for Western democratization strategies in different parts of the world (Huntington 1993). The 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 capitalism over socialism. These developments led to the emergence of numerous civil society organizations in transition societies primarily focused on rights-based agendas and promoting Western liberal values (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2011; Powell and Bromley 2020).

However, an analysis of global political developments over the last three decades indicates that the number of non-democratic regimes has increased significantly, a global
trend in what Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) referred as the ‘third wave of autocratization’. These developments led to extensive discussions in academic and policy circles regarding why Western-backed civil society initiatives largely failed to bring about democratic transformations in non-democratic regimes (Lewis 2014; Lorch and Bunk 2017). One of the dominant explanations is that non-democratic regimes have devised effective regulatory restrictions and coercive strategies that prevent advocacy and claims-making non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from developing into genuine democratization forces (Christensen and Weinstein 2013; Carothers 2016). Thus, today increasing numbers of autocratic regimes are introducing legal and administrative restrictions to undermine Western-backed democracy and human rights promotion initiatives, often demonizing and harassing international donors and their local partners (Carothers 2016). These tendencies are particularly visible in the post-Soviet countries, where autocratic regimes introduced numerous legal interventions to severely restrict the work of NGOs receiving foreign funding (Oleinikova 2017).

Despite the extensive literature on the nexus between civil society and democratization in autocratic regimes, most existing scholarship focuses on politically oriented and/or claim-making civil society organizations. This tendency is not surprising given the fact that most scholarly accounts of the civil society continue to rely on Western-centric understandings of civil society which are closely associated with the values of eighteenth-century Western Europe ‘modernity’. Based on this Western-centric perspective, civil society is understood as a society of politically active citizens with the right to vote, to serve in the public office and to participate in public affairs through exercising their human rights and expressing their critical voice (Keane 1988). It also implies that such citizen participation is voluntary and not tied to state, family and community bonds (Gellner 1995). Accordingly, civil society is frequently defined as the realm of autonomous voluntary organizations consisting of non-governmental and voluntary organizations that are private, non-profit and self-governing (Babajanian et al. 2005). Civil society promotion came to be viewed as an empowerment of dissident opposition groups which mobilized citizens vis-à-vis non-democratic regimes. The onset of a large-scale Western-driven civil society projects in the post-socialist period were grounded on these beliefs.

While the abovementioned accounts provided useful insight, they appear to rely on conventional Western-centric definitions of civil society, which do not recognize more traditional and indigenous forms of civil society. This argument was visible in the works of the scholars who advanced the alternative conceptions of civil society (Sajoo 2002; Hanafi 2009) and criticized that the Western-backed civil society initiatives largely reflect the neo-imperialist agenda, a form of Western hegemony. Under this new conceptualization, the civil society was seen as a communal concept which was less concerned with the citizen versus state relations but focused more on the relations within society based on family ties, good neighbourliness, trust and community solidarity. This implies that patterns of civil society could be better gleaned by observing social relations within families and kinship networks, communities, friendship ties and solidarity groups and movements. Based on these considerations, the advocates of the communal concept of civil society argued for the necessity to resituate the focus from formal structures and organization towards informally organized and spontaneous civil society initiatives.
These global academic debates have also been confirmed in the study of civil society and democratization in Central Asia. While the study of civil society in many non-Western contexts started in the mid-1980s, Central Asia was one of the last regions which witnessed a growing interest in academic research and writing on civil society in the late 1990s (Babajanian et al. 2005). The existing studies of civil society in Central Asia mainly focus on (1) the Western democratization efforts and authoritarian resilience (Ziegler 2016; Hoffmann 2010); (2) the state–civil society relations and co-optation under the conditions of authoritarian governance (Ruffin and Waugh 1999; Knox and Yesimova 2015); (3) the nexus between civil society and political stability (Ziegler 2010; Urinboyev 2011); urban activism and civil society (Isabaeva 2013; Sarkeyeva 2008); and (4) potential and limitations of civil society (Buxton 2009; Bayalieva-Jailobaeva 2014).

Despite the existence of extensive literature on civil society in Central Asia, one idea common to the bulk of existing studies is that they largely focus on politically oriented and/or claim-making civil society organizations. With the exception of few studies that have examined civil society as a communal concept deeply anchored in Central Asia’s Islamic administrative legacy and centuries long traditions of community self-governance and mutual aid (Akine 2002; Roy 2002; Earle 2005; Dadabaev 2013; Urinboyev 2014; Peyrrouse and Nasr 2021), not much has been said about the informally organized and spontaneous forms of civil society in the region. Addressing this question is particularly important given the fact that Central Asian states have non-democratic regimes which leave little room for the fully fledged operation of politically oriented and claim-making civil society organizations. As a result, the mere emphasis on Western-style civil society forms run the risk of overlooking the local context and microlevel political operations in the nondemocratic context of Central Asia. Undoubtedly, little space exists in non-democratic regimes within which civil society organizations may engage in overt political activism due to government restrictions. Notwithstanding these restrictions, there are other, politically less threatening social arenas, where it is possible to identify informally organized and spontaneous civil society initiatives with the potential to redefine and influence long-term state–society relations. Thus, there may be reasons to move away from Western-centric approaches, resituating the focus on the grassroots level, informally organized and spontaneous civil society initiatives, and their interaction with the domestic political environment. Such an approach may provide more nuanced accounts on diverse dynamics within state–society relations in nondemocratic regimes.

Such considerations have informed our position in this paper, which aims to understand the role of mahalla institutions (local community-based organizations) as hybrid institutions in Uzbekistan, a post-Soviet state where the current regime is transitioning from heavily closed authoritarianism towards softer forms of authoritarianism. Here, we argue that the mahalla, a community-based institution originating from Central Asia’s Islamic past and administrative traditions, has now become an institutionalized feature of Uzbekistan’s public administration system (through legislative codification and executive incorporation). As hybrid institutions embodying both formal and informal features, mahallas partly operate on behalf of the state and partly as components of a community-driven informal welfare structure that provides services ranging from social welfare to local governance – that is, functions performed by the state and local government institutions in modern states. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between the ‘administrative’ (formal) mahalla and the ‘social’ (informal) mahalla: the former refers to the
mahalla’s role as a state institution which acts as a subunit of the local government, whereas the latter is used to describe community-based practices that enable people to obtain access to public goods, services, and social protection while bypassing the state. By making a distinction between the formal and informal mahalla, we provide an illustration of the processes and dynamics of the mahalla system and how it evolved to respond to the changing political regime in the post-Soviet period, acting as an informal welfare structure given the failure of the government to secure the basic needs of its citizens. Accordingly, what we might think of as ‘civil society’ in Uzbekistan cannot be satisfactorily understood through the lens of Western-centric understandings of civil society. Instead, reckoning with the literature on alternative conceptions of civil society, we argue for the need to focus on informally organized and spontaneous forms of civil society practices, a process which can be reified through the analysis of everyday life, informal welfare practices, and ordinary people’s daily rumours, gossip, and discourse at the mahalla level. By reconceptualizing these processes as ‘micro-level political operations’, we aim to show that they are not merely mundane practices, but, more importantly, they must be viewed as covert political strategies that reshape everyday social order and state–society relations.

The sociopolitical context of Uzbekistan

After gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan, along with other post-Soviet states, committed itself to the principles of the rule of law and a market economy in its development. Simultaneously, Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan’s first president, who ruled the country for a quarter century with an iron fist, demanded that the transition to a market economy proceed gradually and step by step rather than through the shock therapy approach. While this gradualist approach to market reform allowed Uzbekistan to bypass a steep rise in unemployment and social unrest (Ruziev et al. 2007), it proved counterproductive in the longer term, leading to inefficient resource allocation and widespread corruption. These processes eventually led to a high unemployment rate and further impoverishment of large segments of the population in the 2000s.

Rather than providing social protection and income-earning opportunities, the Uzbek authorities gradually intensified state surveillance and cracked down on dissent, human rights activists and Western-style civil society initiatives. The state’s interference in all sectors of society and the bureaucratic rapacity of corrupt officials further stagnated the economy. Citizens reacted to these changes by devising informal and extra-legal
coping strategies that undermined the legitimacy of the state and its laws in local arenas. As Rasanayagam (2011a) describes, in the Soviet Union a clear vision of the citizen and the state was expressed in the official discourse and enacted in social and material provisions. However, in contemporary Uzbekistan, the state in this sense is ‘absent’, since it failed to secure the basic needs of its citizens. Consequently, the retrenchment of the welfare system forced the population to increasingly rely on local neighbourhood communities, immediate families, and wider kin ties to meet their livelihood needs.

In 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the new president of Uzbekistan, launched an ambitious reform programme under the broad notion that ‘the state should serve its citizens, not vice versa’ (Gazeta.uz 2016). However, Mirziyoyev’s reform initiatives were mainly limited to economic policies, while many features and the legacy of the Karimov-era political and administrative system remain intact. Social inequality further increased in the post-Karimov period, with wealth increasing among kleptocratic elites and business actors well connected to high-level state officials, while poverty and social inequality grew among the population in general, particularly in rural areas (Lasslett 2020). As a result, these changes further undermined the image and legitimacy of the state and its reform agenda.

These developments led to a disjuncture between the state and society. Living standards among the Uzbek people have fallen dramatically, and the number of people claiming social welfare benefits has increased accordingly (Papa et al. 2020). Since the Uzbek authorities failed to provide economic security to its citizens, mahallas have assumed most of the practical functions governing daily life, functions performed by local government institutions in modern states. Accordingly, the mahalla, a citizens’ self-governance institution stemming from Central Asia’s Islamic administrative legacy and traditions, has become a key welfare and service provision structure in people’s everyday lives.

The mahalla in Uzbekistan

Today, the term ‘mahalla’ is commonly used in Uzbekistan to describe the (local) residential neighbourhood uniting residents through common traditions, language, customs, moral values and the reciprocal exchange of money, material goods and services. 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). In contemporary Uzbekistan, there are more than 9500 mahallas. On average, a mahalla may include from 500 to 10,000 households (Seitz et al. 2020). The Ministry for Support of the Mahalla and Family coordinates the activities of all mahallas throughout Uzbekistan. Sievers (2002, 96) differentiates between rural and urban types of mahallas. Rural mahallas constitute former state and collective farms. Urban mahallas, however, can be divided into apartment mahallas (modern apartment complexes), contemporary mahallas (blocks of rather large family houses) and traditional mahallas (blocks of densely structured pre-Soviet single-family houses). Despite their remarkable diversity in terms of space, population and activity, mahallas adhere to a core set of understandings and practices such as paternalism, continuity, the power of moral example, respect for elders and an orientation toward family values (95).

Despite an extensive literature, there is one common dilemma for scholars studying mahallas. This dilemma, as Sievers (2002, 103–104) notes, can be explained by the fact
that ‘mahalla[s] are neither regionally uniform nor static, nor are the types of public goods available to mahalla residents’. Furthermore, we must also consider the historical evolution of mahallas given that they have been changing for centuries due to the establishment or collapse of empires and with the arrival of new ethnic groups or tribes. Therefore, Sievers advises that any depiction of the mahalla in contemporary Uzbekistan should include some account of the mahalla during the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods.

Historically, the mahalla, as a citizens’ self-governance institution, has always played an important role as a welfare and service provision structure. As a non-profit institution, they were not part of the government structure. The origin of the mahalla tradition dates back to the pre-Mongol period, around the eleventh or twelfth centuries when Islamic empires thrived in Central Asia (Sievers 2002). Mahallas were usually a community of several hundred people organized around Islamic rituals and social events. Some mahallas formed along ethnic, religious or professional lines (Abramson 1998, 27). Most mahallas possessed their own mosque, teahouse, bazaar and other facilities (Sievers 2002). The imam (mosque leader) and elders played a crucial role in the administration of the mahalla, providing advice and direction to the local community (Geiss 2001; Dadabaev 2013).

However, following the onset of Soviet rule in Central Asia, mahallas began losing their autonomy. Initially, the early Soviet government tried to eliminate the mahalla as part of its aggressive modernization intervention in Central Asia. After quickly realizing that such efforts would lead to social unrest, the Soviet government altered its strategy and integrated mahallas into state and party structures in order to disseminate communist ideology (Abramson 1998). Eventually, the mahalla was incorporated into the local government as local village councils. Notwithstanding Soviet efforts, mahallas turned out to be resilient institutions and retained many of their informal features, an array of covert strategies visible in life-cycle rituals, praying in congregation (jamoat namozi) and informal dispute resolution practices (Abramson 1998; Sievers 2002; Dadabaev 2013).

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). The mahalla, which served as local village councils 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, the state incorporated the mahalla into its public administration system by delegating an extensive array of administrative tasks. These legal interventions transformed the mahalla into a hybrid institution with formal and informal features. On the one hand, mahallas became a subunit of the local governance system, operating on behalf of the state and as the (state) mechanism of social control. On the other hand, mahallas have preserved their autonomous governance elements, acting on behalf of local residents within state institutions and serving as a local-level provider of social welfare and services.

These developments led to a wide array of research on the mahalla, investigating its transformation and current role in state–society relations. A review of the existing literature shows that there are at least four main approaches to understanding the role of mahallas in contemporary Uzbekistan. First, an extensive literature describes mahallas as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the authoritarian regime (Abramson 1998; Noori 2006; Rasanayagam 2011b). The bulk of these studies argue that the ruling regime in Uzbekistan deploys
the mahalla and its leadership in order to monitor and control the population and, thereby, attempts to extend its authoritarian reach through the manipulation of mahalla-based social control elements. Second, an opposing argument treats mahallas as community-driven institutions that represent people’s interests within local government bodies (Rakhimov and Musaqulov 2005; Masaru 2006). These studies emphasize mahallas’ roles as indigenous civil society institutions that embody the main features of Uzbek culture, such as collectivism, mutual assistance, inclusiveness, paternalism, the power of moral example, respect for elders and an orientation towards family values. Third, there is also a tendency to examine mahallas through a law and society perspective, focusing on their role in maintaining political stability and law and order in Uzbekistan (Sievers 2002). These studies view the mahalla as a social order instrument capable of explaining the dynamics between state and society. Fourth, another account focuses on the mahalla’s role in social policy implementation (Micklewright and Marnie 2005). The central idea common to this entire body of literature concerned itself with the question of whether mahalla-based targeting of social welfare benefits is efficient and helps reduce poverty in Uzbekistan. Some of these studies critically examine the fairness or justness of mahalla-based targeting through a women’s rights perspective, arguing that the mahalla as a patriarchal social structure represents an oppressive social policy instrument in relation to the needs of women and, thus, leads to the abuse of women’s rights (Kamp 2004).

As a review of the mahalla literature indicates, much of the scholarly literature on mahallas continues to rely on an analysis of the ‘formal’ mahalla system (which is regulated by the Mahalla Law), making it difficult to discern the dynamics and informal initiatives that are part and parcel of everyday mahalla life. Thus, the state in Uzbekistan is portrayed as an omnipresent actor capable of fully incorporating the mahalla into its administrative apparatus. The state is certainly a powerful actor when it comes to using coercion and regulating the activities of the ‘formal’ mahalla. However, the state and its coercive structures are incapable of influencing ‘micro-political operations’ that take place at the level of the informal mahalla. The distinction between formal and informal mahalla has also been illustrated in previous research (Dadabaev 2013; Rasanayagam 2011b; Urinboyev 2014), showing how the state’s efforts to co-opt mahallas into the administrative system led to the emergence of informal mahallas based on its own normative order. As Dadabaev (2012; 2013) argues, in spite of their institutionalization in the post-Soviet period, mahallas have retained their ‘unofficial’ self-governance functions centred around an informal network of residents who engaged in information sharing and a voluntary mutual support system. Some studies have claimed that the self-governance efforts can also be observed on the level of formal mahallas whereby formal mahalla leadership sometimes negotiate between the pressures and expectations to implement local government directives and to act in the best interests of their residents (Dadabaev 2013; Masaru 2006). These examples illuminate that we cannot confine the analyses of mahallas to merely being the ‘eyes and ears’ of the authoritarian regime but they are dynamic institutions and constantly evolve to respond to the changing socio-political landscape.

We position this article as an attempt to contribute new insights to the academic literature on mahallas through an ethnographic study of the everyday mahalla in rural Uzbekistan. Our aim is to demonstrate the interplay between the administrative/formal mahalla and the social/informal mahalla: the former is administered by
the Mahalla Law and represents the long arm of the state within local communities, while the latter epitomizes the informal relations between the ordinary residents of these communities, as they organize to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of the state from service delivery. These processes will be illustrated through the case of disputes surrounding the provision of natural gas to a mahalla in rural Fergana during the cold winter months. Before moving on to the empirical section, we first describe the theoretical framework used to analyse our empirical data on formal and informal mahallas.

**Theoretical framework**

In analysing interactions between formal and informal normative orders in the context of the mahalla, we draw upon Migdal’s ‘state-in-society’ approach, the legal pluralism perspective and the ‘co-evolution’ framework. A central idea within Migdal’s (2001) ‘state-in-society’ approach lies in the notion that the state and society are not separate entities; rather, they are intertwined entities that engage in mutually transforming interactions. Migdal argues that a society consists of numerous social organizations (forces), one of which is the state. Social forces can encompass both informal organizations and formal entities. For Migdal, the patterns of domination within a society are primarily determined by key struggles spread across what he calls ‘society’s multiple arenas of domination and opposition’ (99). The state, as one organization within a society, is subject to the ‘pushes and pulls’ in a society’s arenas, and face enormous resistance from other social forces when implementing their policies, since their laws and regulations must compete with the norms of other social forces that promote different versions of how people should behave. These struggles and accommodations not only occur within ‘policy arenas’, where various forces attempt to shape public policy outcomes, but also take place within the basic moral order and the very structure within which the rights and wrongs of everyday social behaviour are determined. The key figures in these struggles are functionaries at different levels of the state (central, regional, district, local or village) which interact at times or come into conflict with an entire constellation of social forces in disparate arenas.

The ‘state-in-society’ approach is helpful in understanding the processes and dynamics of the mahalla system and how informal mahallas have emerged as a reaction to the state’s efforts to penetrate citizens’ lives by establishing formal mahalla committees. Thus, citizens may produce various informal ‘legal orders’ that dictate different versions of social behaviour. These processes are particularly visible when we observe everyday life and social norms within mahallas. Mutually transforming interactions between different social forces can also be explained by the legal pluralism perspective, which emphasizes the coexistence of and clash between multiple sets of rules that mould people’s social behaviour: the law of the nation-state, indigenous customs and rules, religious decrees, moral codes, and practical norms for social life (Merry 1988). Classic legal anthropology studies and the more recent legal pluralism scholarship documented the emergence of ‘semi-autonomous social fields’ or ‘nonstate forms of normative ordering’, with their own forms of regulation and informal norms, many of which contradict state law (Moore 1973). From this point of view, state law merely represents one among many other normative orders within a society.
Equipped with the ‘state-in-society’ approach and the legal pluralism perspective, we can infer that no single, integrated set of rules in any society exists, whether codified in law, sanctified in religion, or established as the rules of daily social behaviour. Quite simply, there is no uncontested universal normative code that guides people’s lives and actions; the very nature of the social order is determined by the outcomes of struggles and the interplay among plural normative orders. This implies that the mahalla is a social arena, in which different ‘legal orders’ enter into mutually transforming interactions, a process which may lead to new organizational forms and changes. These processes can be explained by the ‘co-evolution’ framework (Lewin and Volberda 1999) developed within the field of organizational studies. According to Lewin and Volberda (1999), organizations and context enter into mutually transforming interactions. Organizations are bound by the policies, regulations, and social norms that establish the framework for their operation. But these normative frameworks can be renegotiated and modified by the actors who lead them. In other words, organizational forms may be both a product of the context and can influence it, such that the context may both constrain actors and provide opportunities for some to interpret, manipulate, and even change the limits and opportunities that surround them (Batley and Rose 2011). The co-evolution lens has the potential to explain the interplay between micro- and macro-level processes within a unifying framework (Lewin and Volberda 1999). The co-evolution framework can thus be used as a lens to understand how mahallas, as traditional community-based organizations, have evolved into hybrid institutions in light of the state’s co-optation and incorporation efforts.

Methodological considerations

Methodologically, we investigated these processes through an ethnographic study conducted in Uzbekistan between April 2009 and June 2021 (for a total of 20 months). Both co-authors, drawing from our ‘ethnographic toolkit’ (Reyes 2020) – that is, extensive fieldwork experiences in the post-Soviet context, and as individuals originating from Uzbekistan with local language skills and lived experiences within Central Asian culture and society – collected rich ethnographic data on state–society relations in Uzbekistan. The primary methods of data collection during our fieldwork consisted of observations, informal interviews and in-depth qualitative interviews.

Observation and informal interviews were conducted in social spaces and at events where most residents came together and exchanged information on a daily basis. The informants included a diverse group of people holding a variety of social positions, representing both ‘people of influence’ (mahalla leaders, religious leaders, wealthy families, local state officials) and ordinary residents. For this specific article, we have chosen to present the case study of informal mahalla and gas distribution disputes in Oqtepa mahalla in rural Fergana which resulted from our observations and informal interviews conducted during the period 2014–17. Hence, this article focuses on a small segment of the empirical data collected within the larger project.

This article also relies on recent interview data which provide an insight into the latest administrative developments in Uzbekistan concerning mahallas. In June 2021, we conducted 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with such key informants as academics who research local governance, mahallas and decentralization issues; civil servants charged
with the implementation of mahalla and local governance policies and laws; members of the Parliament of Uzbekistan; employees of the law enforcement agencies; former governors; mahalla committee chairs; representatives of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs); and civil society representatives such as legal aid lawyers, human rights activists, journalists and bloggers.

The use of the aforementioned multiple data-collection strategies generated a rich stock of empirical materials about 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. In order to ensure maximum anonymity, we have changed the names of the informants, the villages and the mahallas, and provide only the most general information about any specific fieldwork site in the accounts that follow.

The formal mahalla

Since becoming independent in 1991, the Uzbek authorities have ardently portrayed the mahalla as an indigenous civil society institution. Although a similar mahalla tradition may also be found in other Islamic societies stretching from Central Europe to Southeast Asia (Trofimov 1995; Louw 2007), the fact that Uzbek authorities co-opted and ‘statized’ (davlatlashtirish) mahallas renders them unique. In other words, mahallas have been transformed into a state administrative institution following the adoption of the Mahalla Law – ‘The Law on Citizens’ Self-Government Bodies’ (adopted in 1993 and subsequently revised in 1999 and 2013), which incorporated mahallas into the public administration system.

According to the Mahalla Law (2013), mahallas are ‘an independent self-governance institution of citizens and not part of the system of public administration’ (Article 8). This definition implies that mahallas are autonomous nongovernmental institutions, representing its residents’ interests to state institutions. Simultaneously, however, the Mahalla Law assigns numerous tasks and responsibilities to mahallas, functions normally performed by government agencies in modern states. According to the law, mahallas assist local government bodies in implementing a wide range of issues, tasks, and policies. As a result, nearly all tasks that fall within the scope of local government functions are performed by mahallas (Articles 11 and 13, Mahalla Law 2013), which virtually turned them into subdistrict extensions of the local government.

Under the Mahalla Law (2013), the rais (leader), a state employee, administers the mahalla committee through the citizen’s assembly (fuqarolar yig’ini). Decisions from mahalla (citizens’ self-government bodies) officials are legally binding on citizens and legal entities in the relevant territory, such that noncompliance is punishable by law (Article 19). The citizen’s assembly is the supreme governing body of the mahalla, which elects the rais, the executive secretary, the advisor, and the chairmen of the auditing and administrative committees of the mahalla. While the Mahalla Law stipulates that the leader of the mahalla is elected by citizens for a three-year term, in reality, the outcome of these elections is usually known, since the hokim (governor of a city or district) decides whether a person is fit to assume the position. Our fieldwork observations and interviews in numerous cases confirmed that mahalla leaders are directly subordinate to hokims and can be easily removed when they fail to comply with a hokim’s orders and expectations.¹
Accordingly, these legal interventions have transformed mahallas into a powerful social control instrument. Mahallas can now interfere into even strictly private spheres of people’s lives, ranging from styles of dress to husband-spouse relationships. Noncompliance with the decisions of mahalla officials may lead to legal and extra-legal sanctions. Uzbek authorities also created the position of ‘mahalla posboni’ (mahalla guard), an individual responsible for collecting information about residents’ daily lives and reporting them to law enforcement agencies. In other words, the mahalla is used by the state as a means of projecting itself as an invincible and omnipresent force in society. Since most people are aware that the state is present in mahallas through its salaried mahalla officials, they try to avoid criticizing the government and its failures in the presence of mahalla officials. There have been reports that mahalla committees are often used by the authoritarian regime to suppress dissent and monitor the lives of politically active and religious individuals. This was particularly visible during Karimov’s reign.

During Karimov’s rule (1991–2016), mahallas throughout Uzbekistan were united under the Mahalla Foundation, a GONGO. After Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, mahallas received a new mission: to act as the main driver of Mirziyoyev’s administrative reforms. In February 2020, a new state body – the Ministry for Support of the Mahalla and Family – was established, which was primarily tasked with coordinating state policies and laws on mahallas, providing social protection to vulnerable populations, and facilitating job creation through the development of mahalla-based entrepreneurial projects. Another important function of the ministry is to provide funding to mahallas and capacity-building trainings for mahalla chairs.

The creation of the new mahalla ministry has generated mixed reactions from policymakers, experts, and the general public. Experts within the Uzbek government perceived this as a logical step in further developing the mahalla system in Uzbekistan, indicating the need for a separate state agency which can regulate, systematize, and strengthen all laws, policies, and social relations related to the mahallas. However, the fact that a considerable share of the ministry’s leadership at the central and local levels consists of former employees of law enforcement agencies (mostly from the Ministry of the Interior) gives some clues that the state wants to further tighten its control over mahallas. In this respect, our interviewees, namely mahalla leaders in Bukhara and Fergana, critically reacted to and interpreted the establishment of a new ministry as the state’s attempt to further incorporate the mahalla into public administration:

‘The representative of the Mahalla Ministry is also considered the deputy governor in each district. The president did this in order to increase the prestige of the Mahalla Ministry. The main task of the ministry is to support the mahallas, but 99% of those who work in this ministry think of the mahallas on the ground as their subsystem.’

These tendencies are particularly reflected in Uzbek authorities’ recent policy initiatives aimed to harness mahallas for social policy and poverty reduction programmes. Dubbed the ‘mahallabay ishlash’ (literally, working individually with each mahalla), the programme categorizes vulnerable groups of the population in different databases, the so-called ‘iron notebook’ (for impoverished families), the ‘women’s notebook’ and the ‘youth notebook’ (which are further divided into subcategories). The mahallas’ role is to assist the state in determining who belongs to such vulnerable groups. Our analysis of these recent developments illustrates that mahallas are overburdened with numerous
tasks and participate in all state policies and programmes, whether social welfare, environmental protection, combating religious extremism, preventing crime, tax collection or landscaping. Thus, mahallas have simply turned into sub-district extensions of the central government.

Nevertheless, our fieldwork findings indicate that, despite the ‘statization of mahallas’, it is possible to find two parallel power structures within mahallas. In this regard, the current administrative structure of the mahalla is likely based on the interplay between formal and informal leadership. Informal leaders of the mahalla assume an informal leadership role in tandem with the formal mahalla leadership. This parallel power structure can be regarded as a form of hybrid governance, which emerged as a reaction to the ‘state capture of the mahalla’. If we interpret these developments from Migdal’s ‘state-in-society’ approach, legal pluralism perspective and the ‘co-evolution’ framework, the state is not the only dominant actor in Uzbekistan but there are multiple social forces in society which may produce various informal ‘legal orders’ that advance different versions of social behaviour. In other words, mahalla can be regarded as a social arena where different ‘legal orders’ engage in mutually transforming interactions, a new organizational form which is visible in the emergence of formal and informal power geometries in mahallas. Accordingly, the emergence of informal mahalla leadership can be regarded as a form of people’s mundane resistance to the ever-growing government efforts to incorporate mahallas to public administration system. In the next section, we describe these processes empirically through the case study of informal mahalla and gas distribution disputes in Oqtepa mahalla in rural Fergana during the period 2014–17.

The informal mahalla

As discussed above, the Uzbek state heavily relies on the mahallas to exercise social control and ensure its presence in people’s lives. Yet, the state is potentially weak in terms of enforcing the rule of law and providing welfare and public services. This weakness has resulted in reinvigorating mahalla-based informal practices and networks as an informal welfare and service provision system. It is difficult to glean the patterns of these informal welfare structures when we examine the formal mahalla. Such practices largely take place at the level of the informal mahalla, community-driven initiatives and networks largely obscured in current understandings of the mahalla system. These processes can be reified through the analysis of power geometries and informal practices that take place in everyday mahalla life.

Mahallas are currently administered by both a formal leader (rais, elected according to the Mahalla Law) and an informal leader (oqsoqol, informally elected by mahalla residents). Before the adoption of the first Mahalla Law in 1993, mahallas were administered by two informal leaders: an oqsoqol (literally, ‘whitebeard’) and an imam (a religious leader). Thus, the state’s legal interventions led to the formation of two parallel power structures in the mahalla: (1) the formal mahalla committee administered by a rais, a state-salaried employee; and (2) the informal mahalla administered by an oqsoqol, an informal leader who works pro bono and is unofficially elected by that mahalla’s residents. The formal leader has a small state-owned office space located within the territory of the mahalla, while the administrative building of the informal mahalla is typically situated in mahalla-owned social spaces such as a guzar or choyxona (social space or teahouse)
where residents gather on a daily basis to conduct the bulk of mahalla information exchanges. In contrast to the formal mahalla leader and his/her assistants who are seen by mahalla residents as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the government, the informal leader enjoys the trust and respect of the people. The formal leader works on behalf of the state and assists in the implementation of local governance issues, while the informal leader represents the interests of the mahalla residents within state institutions, even when the mahalla residents’ actions clash with state law. As a part of his work, the informal leader also coordinates life-cycle rituals (weddings and funerals), collects donations from wealthier families, and distributes them to needy households, collects money from households for mahalla-based irrigation, heating, or road paving, mediates disputes among residents, and organizes hashar (community-based mutual assistance work) for various mahalla projects.

In contemporary Uzbekistan, as the state retreated from its service and welfare provision obligations, ordinary citizens responded to these changes by creating an informal mahalla-specific administration system based on its own normative order (social norms, traditions and Islamic principles). Here, we rely on ethnographic material related to everyday energy struggles in one of the villages in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan to illustrate these processes.

In Uzbekistan, the energy sector is one of the key social arenas where the state and citizens interact with one another on a daily basis. Although Uzbekistan is a major producer and exporter of natural gas, ordinary people in many rural areas of the country are forced to endure the cold winter months with little or no gas, since the government prioritizes export sales over domestic consumers. The energy shortage has led to numerous localized 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 centralized 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 prioritize 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. How people talk about the energy shortage, what they classify as just use and fair distribution of energy, the tactics and coping strategies that they employ when negotiating and struggling over access to energy, and the moral framework within which they place these events, is instructive in helping us understand the impact of the centralized energy policies on everyday life, a process illustrated by examining everyday interactions at the level of the informal mahalla.

Oqtepa, from which an informal mahalla case study is drawn, is situated in rural Fergana, consisting of 120 households with a population of more than 800 people. An account of everyday energy disputes in the Oqtepa mahalla illustrates the informal
mahalla-based administration system. Like many other mahallas in Uzbekistan, people in Oqtepa 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. Another reason for the gas shortage was that Hokimnazar, a local oligarch, operated a large factory, which consumed huge amounts of energy. In order to ensure that his factory ran smoothly, Hokimnazar bribed the head of the district gas supply department (hereinafter 'raigaz'). Oqtepa residents submitted numerous complaints over the rai gaz to the public prosecutor’s office, but their grievances remained unaddressed.

This situation led to fierce competition between mahalla residents over the distribution of gas. One way to increase the gas supply to a household was to install a pilesos, a pump that increases 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, is not visible to anyone outside that specific household. Since the use of a pilesos was illegal, the raigaz, in collaboration with the leader of the formal mahalla, regularly conducted raids in order 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 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.

Figure 1. Pilesos: a pump used to increase the gas pressure in a household’s pipe.
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, hence the most powerful, one, 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 their peaceful coexistence. After several incidents, the mahalla residents gathered at the mahalla’s 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 to coordinate and control 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 Islam). The imam commented that using a large pilesos and thereby overconsuming 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 on a daily basis to monitor the implementation of the mahalla decision.

However, during these visits it turned out that 11 households did not abide by the mahalla decision. This was because these households were the wealthiest and assumed that 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 mahalla norms.

Although members of the 11 wealthy households disagreed with this decision, they could do nothing, since the majority of residents insisted on disconnecting them from the GRB. Rather than challenging the mahalla, however, the 11 families bribed theraigaz and connected their own gas pipes to their households, bypassing the mahalla’s GRB. These developments led to the emergence of 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 which 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 theraigaz increase the gas pressure given that all gas meters would be placed outside the household, visible to theraigaz inspectors. As a result, all households installed their gas meters on the street and were no longer able to use pilesos, a new situation which provided leverage for the oqsoqol and imam so that they could strike a deal with the head of theraigaz on increasing the gas pressure.
The above presented case of gas disputes in Oqtepa shows us how daily mundane and spontaneous practices that take place in the realm of informal mahalla enabled the community 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 the local government. It was the informal mahalla leadership that innovatively mediated the disputes and found a workable solution to people’s daily needs even though these strategies were not necessarily in line with the state law. Accordingly, these micro-level power dynamics and negotiations, 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 the state law), illustrates that mahalla is a legally plural social arena, in which different ‘legal orders’ enter into mutually transforming interactions. These processes, in turn, produced new organizational forms within Oqtepa mahalla, leading to the emergence of parallel power structures, formal mahalla and informal mahalla.

While the empirical example we provided focus on the particular case of gas distribution disputes in a specific mahalla, we emphasize that the (informal) mahalla is a dynamic community-based institution which can encompass and address wider relationships pertaining to service provision and social welfare. Regardless of how hard the government tries to co-opt them, mahallas have a built-in mechanism that produces spontaneous responses in pursuit of its residents’ interests relative to the state. Having said that, the ethnographic material presented in this article should not be seen as an

Figure 2. All households moved their gas meters to the street to make them visible for inspection.
attempt to extrapolate that there is a parallel structure of informal mahallas alongside every mahalla in Uzbekistan. Rather, mahallas are dynamic institutions that may develop various informal responses and strategies depending on contextual factors, regional peculiarities and the level of socio-economic development.

Implications for civil society and democratization debates

The aim of the article was to examine the role of mahallas in Uzbekistan – hybrid institutions that have both formal and informal features. In doing so, we argued for the necessity to distinguish between the ‘administrative’ (formal) mahalla and the ‘social’ (informal) mahalla: the former, operating on behalf of the state, has been incorporated into Uzbekistan’s public administration system as a subunit of local government, whereas the latter, as a spontaneous and informally organized community-based institution, enables people to meet their livelihood needs and address their daily problems and conflicts while bypassing the state.

Empirically, these processes were demonstrated through the case study of informal mahalla and gas distribution disputes in Oqtepa mahalla in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan. The gas disputes case presented in this article illustrates how the informal mahalla functions vis-à-vis the formal mahalla and other state institutions. When looking at mahalla-based coping strategies and people’s reasoning, it becomes obvious that the formal mahalla plays little role in people’s daily lives, whereas informal mahalla-based initiatives and relationships constitute the basic fabric of society. The reasoning of many mahalla residents we encountered was driven by an understanding that mahalla-based coping strategies have become an alternative (to the state) as a means of securing their basic needs given the failure of the state to provide much needed development in rural Uzbekistan. Our case study shows that everyday life and social relations in the informal mahalla are shaped by social norms, traditions, as well as on Islamic principles and values.

Theoretically, we drew on Migdal’s ‘state-in-society’ approach, the legal pluralism perspective, and the ‘co-evolution’ framework, in order to understand and conceptualize our empirical data on formal and informal features of mahalla, particularly how mahallas have evolved into hybrid institutions in the light of the state’s co-optation and incorporation efforts. Our analysis shows that the mahalla is a legally plural social arena where different ‘legal orders’ and power geometries coexist, clash and enter into mutually transforming interactions, thereby resulting in new organizational forms and changes. The emergence of parallel power structures in mahallas clearly illustrate these processes, demonstrating the role of micro-political operations in mundane situations.

Our findings have also implications for broader scholarly debates on why Western-backed civil society initiatives do not produce their expected outcomes in non-Western, non-democratic contexts. The process of mahallas’ incorporation into the public administration system in Uzbekistan confirms global academic debates on state–society relations in non-democratic regimes, showing how autocratic regimes use various administrative and legal interventions to neutralize civil society institutions. However, our study differs from previous research in several respects. First, through the case study of informal mahalla, we demonstrated that we must also focus on covert and spontaneous micro-political operations that take place at the bottom of society,
where individuals frequently challenge the laws and institutions of the state. Although these micro-level operations pose no direct challenge to the state, they carry the potential to redefine state–society relations and even the everyday social order in the longer term. Second, our case study also showed that a Western-centric understanding of civil society, often based on individualism and human rights, does not fully reflect the social context of Uzbekistan, where society is based on communal values, a contextual difference requiring us to fine-tune our conventional understanding when applying it to a non-Western context. Accordingly, what we might think of as ‘civil society’ in a non-democratic and non-Western context such as Uzbekistan cannot be satisfactorily understood if we merely rely on Western-centric perspectives of civil society. Rather, in line with the growing literature on alternative conceptions of civil society, we suggest that the study of civil society in non-democratic contexts should focus on informal civil society initiatives which can be reified through the investigation of mundane, informally organized and spontaneous micro-political operations.

Notes

1. Interviews with mahalla leaders in the Bukhara and Fergana regions, Uzbekistan, 18–25 June 2021.
2. Interview with a representative of the Ministry for Support of the Mahalla and Family in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 21 June 2021.
3. Interviews with mahalla leaders in the Bukhara and Fergana regions, Uzbekistan, 18–25 June 2021.

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