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From Welfare to Watchdog: The Mahalla and Power

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## **Abstract**

This thesis argues that the mahalla, a common form of communal self-governance found across Central Asia, has become a central mechanism through which power in Uzbekistan is normalized and sustained. It demonstrates how the mahalla evolved from a loosely structured community unit into a formalized institution deeply embedded within state administration. This transformation occurred through two intertwined processes: symbolic elevation and institutional formalization. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of governmentality, tripartite power and securitisation, the study reveals how the mahalla serves not only as a symbolic tool of cultural legitimacy but also as a localized extension of state control.

Furthermore, the mahalla contributes to regime stability in a context marked by formal political fragility. It does so by operationalizing the state's securitization agenda, especially in relation to restricting informal or independent religious expression. The mahalla enables the state to suppress dissent and manage the populations under the rhetoric of securitisation. In this way, control is routinized and depoliticized through familiar, community-based structures. The mahalla thus plays a dual role: it legitimizes the state by drawing on tradition, while also expanding its reach through everyday mechanisms of governance. This fusion of symbolic heritage and legislative formalisation makes the mahalla an unusually effective tool for maintaining order in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

**Keywords:** Mahalla, Tripartite Power, Securitization, Governmentality

## **Abstrakt Deutsch**

Diese Arbeit argumentiert, dass die Mahalla, eine Form gemeinschaftlicher Selbstverwaltung in Zentralasien, zu einem zentralen Mechanismus geworden ist, durch den Macht in Usbekistan normalisiert und aufrechterhalten wird. Sie zeigt auf, wie sich die Mahalla von einer locker strukturierten Gemeinschaftseinheit zu einer formalisierten Institution entwickelt hat, die tief in die staatliche Verwaltung eingebettet ist. Diese Transformation vollzog sich durch zwei miteinander verflochtene Prozesse: die symbolische Aufwertung und die institutionelle Formalisierung. Aufbauend auf Foucaults Konzepten der Gouvernamentalität, der tripartiten Macht und der Versicherheitlichung analysiert die Studie, wie die Mahalla nicht nur als symbolisches Instrument kultureller Legitimation fungiert, sondern auch als lokalisierte Verlängerung staatlicher Kontrolle. Darüber hinaus trägt die Mahalla zur Stabilität des Regimes in einem Kontext formaler politischer Fragilität bei. Sie tut dies, indem sie die sicherheitspolitische Agenda des Staates operationalisiert, insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Einschränkung informeller oder unabhängiger religiöser Ausdrucksformen. Die Mahalla ermöglicht es dem Staat, abweichendes Verhalten zu unterdrücken und die Bevölkerung unter dem Deckmantel der Sicherheitspolitik zu steuern. Auf diese Weise wird Kontrolle über vertraute, gemeinschaftsbasierte Strukturen alltäglich gemacht und entpolitisiert. Die Mahalla übernimmt somit eine doppelte Rolle: Sie legitimiert den Staat durch Rückgriff auf Tradition und erweitert gleichzeitig dessen Reichweite durch alltägliche Formen der Regierungsführung. Diese Verschmelzung von symbolischem Erbe und gesetzlicher Formalisierung macht die Mahalla zu einem außergewöhnlich effektiven Instrument zur Aufrechterhaltung der Ordnung im postsowjetischen Usbekistan.

**Schlagwörter:** Mahalla, tripartite Macht, Versicherheitlichung, Gouvernamentalität

**Pledge of honesty**

*On my honour as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.*

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### 1. Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has defied many of the destabilizing trends that have plagued its regional neighbors. While neighboring countries such as Tajikistan descended into civil war only one year after independence and Kyrgyzstan experienced multiple revolutions and ethnic clashes, Uzbekistan has maintained a striking level of political stability, avoiding large-scale interethnic conflict, regime change, or civil unrest. This enduring stability has puzzled many observers, particularly given Uzbekistan's complex challenges: balancing secular governance within a religious population, managing threats from transnational Islamic movements, and navigating the legacies of Soviet authoritarianism. This could be due to the fact that instead of setting economic growth at its main objective, Uzbekistan's proclaimed "stability at any cost" as its main goal<sup>1</sup>.

At the center of this stability lies the mahalla – a traditional neighborhood community that has been reconfigured as a key element of Uzbekistan's governance architecture. Official state discourse has embraced a particular narrative in regards of the mahalla, presenting it as a timeless Uzbek institution, an expression of national identity that survived the centuries and Soviet occupation, a vehicle for grassroots democracy. This narrative has been embraced not only by state officials and international, but also development agencies, NGOs, and multilateral donors, which have invested heavily in cooperation schemes with mahallas, as a part of a broader strategy of democratization through decentralization.

Yet over time, more critical literature has challenged this narrative, revealing a deep ambivalence at the core of the mahalla's modern role. Scholars and human rights organizations have argued that far from being a purely autonomous site of local empowerment, the contemporary mahalla has evolved into a key mechanism through which the state exercises control over its population. Contrary to official discourse, instead of devolving power to the people, mahallas have been integrated into the state's apparatus and actively contribute to the monitoring and control of the civil population through various formal and informal mechanisms such as welfare distribution. These functions go beyond

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<sup>1</sup> M.C. Spechler, "Uzbekistan: The Silk Road to Nowhere?," *Contemporary Economic Policy* 18, no. 3 (July 2000): 295–303, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7287.2000.tb00026.x>, 295.

bureaucratic administration; they reach into the intimate, private realms of everyday life, from regulating religious practices to overseeing marital disputes and restricting divorce.

And yet, what is striking is the absence of overt resistance despite the encroachment into private life. Despite growing awareness of the mahalla's role in surveillance and norm enforcement, the population largely accepts its role and authority. This is quite noteworthy considering Michel Foucault's well-known claim that "Where there is power, there is resistance."<sup>2</sup>

This thesis argues that the mahalla's transformation illustrates the evolution of power from sovereign repression to diffuse, localized control, in which disciplinary power and biopower are fused into the fabric of everyday governance. Drawing on Foucault's tripartite model of power, this thesis examines how the mahalla has become a key node in the Uzbek's state ability to govern through the management of life, rather than just the repression of dissent. With the mahalla, the state attempts to manage its population through practices that appear benign. In doing so, the mahalla becomes an example of how modern power operates not only from above, but from within – distributed across institution that claims to serve the community.

To support this claim, the thesis answers a central research question, "How does the mahalla's continuous integration into state structure demonstrate the normalization of power in Uzbekistan?" in two dimensions. First, in what ways has the structure of the mahalla evolved historically, and why has it become such an effective instrument of state power in the post-independence period? And second, how does the mahalla contribute to the stability of the state, particularly in the light of its continuous classification as a fragile state?

Ultimately, the mahalla is not merely a surviving vestige of tradition, but a living apparatus of modern governance. It reflects how state power in Uzbekistan has been normalized, not just through coercion, but through cultural legitimization, institutional expansion, and everyday practices that render surveillance and discipline both ordinary and legitimate. In doing so, the mahalla exemplifies how power today operates not only from above, but from within – embedded in institutions that claim to serve the community while instead sustaining the state.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 95.

## 2. Literature review

Scholarship on the mahalla in Uzbekistan has predominantly framed it in binary terms – either as an instrument of authoritarian control that extends state surveillance into everyday life, or as a traditional social safety net that provides welfare and mutual aid at the neighborhood level. While official narratives claim that mahalla reforms have expanded citizens’ self-government and local autonomy, many Western scholars and human rights organizations contend that these legal reforms have instead entrenched state authority at the local level. However, this binary view often overlooks the political function that welfare and social stability policies served in the post-independence period.

It is therefore important to not reduce the mahalla to a simple mechanism of coercion or social support, but critical mechanisms for securing political stability during and after Uzbekistan’s fragile early statehood. In this sense, social policies – and by extension, mahalla reforms – become tools to extend and legitimize state power across society.

### 2.1. Conceptual Foundations: Theories of Social Control and State Power

#### 2.1.1. Governmentality and the Micro-foundation of Power

This section outlines the conceptual frameworks that inform this thesis, particularly theories of governmentality, surveillance and state power as derived from Michel Foucault. These concepts provide a useful analytical lens for examining how the mahalla, a community-level institution, functions as an instrument of both social control and governance. Foucault’s concept of governmentality has become foundational in the analysis of how modern states exercise power in diffuse and decentralized ways. It can be defined as the art of governing without relying on overt coercion, but through subtle management of populations via mechanisms such as norms and institutions.

Governmentality does not rely solely on laws, prohibitions, or direct force. Instead, it encompasses a range of strategies by which states seek to shape the conduct of populations, governing through institutions, practices, and discourses that encourage individuals to self-regulate and conform to desired norms. Governmentality regroups “(...) the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population

as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument.”<sup>3</sup>

Foucault theorized three interrelated forms of power: sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower. Sovereign power, historically concerned with the protection of the prince and his territory, is secured through the monopoly of violence and the right to take life. Disciplinary power, by contrast, revolves around the socially constructed division between the “normal” and the “abnormal”, and targets individuals or groups who deviate from accepted standards, subjecting them to corrective measures designed to enforce conformity<sup>4</sup>. Biopower, meanwhile, is concerned with the promotion and management of life at the population level. As Foucault asserts, biopower “makes life live” by fostering desirable forms of life and governing populations as collective, biological entities.

Rather than relying solely on top-down imposition, biopower involves the promotion of specific lifestyles and behaviors, encouraging individuals to internalize and adopt practices that align with the state’s vision of social order. Biopower is “part of a new type of governing for which life is a reservoir that must be tapped into rather than subjected to legal or disciplinary strictures.”<sup>5</sup> Biopower and disciplinary power are therefore interdependent, forming “two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed.”<sup>6</sup> Importantly, disciplinary power and biopower are intertwined with the notion of security. In his last lecture series, *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault argued that securing life involves purging it of perceived threats. The governance of populations thus involves both the protection and the purification of social bodies, processes observable in various state strategies aimed at shaping citizens conduct.

Drawing on Foucault, numerous scholars have illustrated how Soviet-era policies sought to engineer an ideal socialist citizen through biopolitical strategies such as Kotkin, or more recently Prozorov. The mahalla can similarly be viewed as an institutional site where disciplinary and biopolitical powers converge. Historically rooted in community self-

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Lemon and Hélène Thibault, “Counter-Extremism, Power and Authoritarian Governance in Tajikistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 1 (June 30, 2017): 137–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1336155>, 140.

<sup>5</sup> Sven-Olov Wallenstein, “Introduction: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Governmentality,” in *Foucault, Biopolitics, and Governmentality*, ed. Jakob Nilsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2013), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

governance, the mahalla was formalized under soviet rule, and later reappropriated by the Uzbek state as a mechanism of social regulation. Foucault's assertion that "power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations (...)", is particularly relevant<sup>7</sup>. The mahalla does not merely transmit orders from the state downwards, but embeds governance within local social relations, with community members themselves participating in surveillance, regulation, and norm enforcement. Through this institution, the state governs at a distance, achieving compliance not solely through overt coercion but through the influence of existing community structures and expectations.

### 2.1.2. Governmentality and Surveillance in Central Asia

Rather than offering an exhaustive theoretical exposition of Foucault's works, this section demonstrates how scholars have previously drawn on Foucauldian concepts to analyze state-society relations in comparable contexts, thereby establishing the relevance of these frameworks for the study of the mahalla.

In the context of Central Asia, Adams and Rustemova have notably applied Foucault's concept of governmentality to analyze how national spectacles, and public rituals serve as instruments of state power, channeling authority through symbolic performances that reinforce narratives of nationhood in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan<sup>8</sup>. Their comparative analysis highlights distinct styles of governmentality: Kazakhstan has adopted a more neoliberal forms of governance, while Uzbekistan relies on a more top-down, paternalistic form of governance that aims to shape its population through discourses about nationhood. Although their focus is on macro-level symbolic governance, their study demonstrates the utility and Foucauldian concepts in analyzing how power is exercised through both formal and informal mechanisms. Building on this approach, this thesis shifts focus from national spectacles to the mahalla, a local institution that exemplifies how power operates at the micro-level. As Foucault emphasized, power is not solely imposed from above; rather, it circulates through capillary networks of local norms, institutions, and practices. By examining how the Uzbek state has co-opted and formalized this institution, this paper aims

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Laura L. Adams and Assel Rustemova, "Mass Spectacle and Styles of Governmentality in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (August 25, 2009): 1249–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130903068798>.

to investigate how governance extends its reach into the intimate spaces of everyday community life.

A related strand of scholarship has explored how post-Soviet Central Asian regimes have maintained political stability and extended control over their population through different strategies of governance. Drawing on Foucault's insight into the transition from overt coercive power to more diffuse, disciplinary forms of control, scholars have emphasized how modern states govern not only through laws of violence, but by embedding power in everyday institutions and practices. Power becomes productive, shaping behavior, identities, and norms.

In this context, Burnashev argues that the relative political durability of Central Asian regimes is linked to a reconfiguration of governance logics – a shift in emphasis from security to disciplinary mechanisms. These are characterized by rigid norm codification and the development of oversight procedures. Simultaneously, the regimes use securitization terminology and techniques to expand control over all aspects of daily existence, rendering citizens both visible and governable. As Burnashev explains, “(...) in Central Asian countries private and public spaces are reversed: private issues such as ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation come to the surface and become subject to state control, while issues that should be public, such as elections and politics, are hidden and become the private business of a small group of people.”<sup>9</sup> This reversal not only blurs the line between the political and the personal, but also facilitates a system in which conformity and obedience are produced through surveillance, rather than through open repression alone. In Uzbekistan, the mahalla exemplifies this shift – a local institution where disciplinary norms, surveillance, and securitization converge to govern private life, reinforcing the state's presence deep within the social fabric.

Complementing this perspective, Lemon and Thibault employ Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and biopower to examine counter-extremism policies and authoritarian governance in Tajikistan. Their study illustrates how the Tajik state does not merely suppress religious practices, but actively seeks to cultivate loyal subjects through prescriptive interventions into everyday life. Consistent with Foucault's argument that power is exercised at every level of society, the Tajik government deploys measures intent

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<sup>9</sup> Rustam Burnashev, “Michel Foucault's Concept of ‘Dispositif of Security’: Central Asian Weak States,” *Eurasiatica* 19 (April 26, 2023): 193–210, <https://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-667-1/010>, 206.

on reshaping citizens behaviors, beliefs, and identities. Importantly, they underscore the soviet legacy of these policies: “In keeping with our Foucauldian approach, we argue that religious policy did not emerge from nowhere; to understand state policies towards religion in Tajikistan it is important to acknowledge their Soviet genealogy.”<sup>10</sup> One striking example cited of when disciplinary and biopower strategies intersected was the changes proposed to naming practices. In 2016, the Civil Registration law was amended to prohibit names perceived as excessively Arabic, while a government approved list of names was published to encourage “appropriate” Tajik names. This policy simultaneously disciplines non-conforming practices, while promoting a state sanctioned vision of national identity, thereby illustrating the intersection of disciplinary and biopolitical strategies and the productive dimension of power. Finally, echoing Foucault’s notion that power is internalized and reproduced through self-regulation, Lemon and Thibault demonstrate how counter-radicalization measures operate through community networks, encouraging individuals to monitor both themselves and others. Ultimately, these policies aim not merely to restrict but to produce self-regulating, secular citizens through disciplinary and biopower.

## 2.2. The Mahalla as a Mechanism of Social Control

While often portrayed as a community-based support network, the mahalla also serves as a mechanism of social control. Through different mechanisms ranging from collaboration with state authorities, informal social pressure, control over welfare distribution, mahallas enforce behavioral conformity and monitor political dissent, blending community governance with state oversight.

Human Rights Watch has documented how Mahalla Committees have been instrumental in advancing state objectives in three key areas of repression. Specifically, Mahalla Committees have facilitated three key areas of state control: the surveillance and repression of individuals practicing Islam beyond officially sanctioned parameters, the enforcement of traditional social norms, including the minimization of domestic violence under guise of

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Lemon and Hélène Thibault, “Counter-Extremism, Power and Authoritarian Governance in Tajikistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 1 (June 30, 2017): 137–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1336155>, 141.

preserving social harmony, and the implementation of the government's forced resettlement program during 2000-2001<sup>11</sup>.

These practices exemplify the intersection of disciplinary power and biopower – blending the micro-level self-regulation of individual behaviors with broader strategies of population management.

### 2.2.1. Enforcement of Social Norms

Societies rely on mechanisms of social control to promote desired norms and behaviors, using a combination of rewards and punishments to encourage conformity<sup>12</sup>. Social control encourages the conformity to cultural norms, with the use of positive sanctions. In sociology, sanctions refer to the ways in which society enforces norms – these can be formal or informal, as well as positive or negative<sup>13</sup>. Positive sanctions reward behavior that aligns with society's expectations, while negative ones discourage deviation, either through official channels or through social disapproval.

Social control often operates independently of direct state enforcement; individuals internalize norms and self-regulate due to the fear of social repercussions. In this context, the traditional structure of the mahalla – neighborhoods oriented around communal courtyards – enabled constant mutual observation. Much like Foucault's Panopticon, this spatial arrangement facilitated continual surveillance, embedding norm enforcement into the physical and social fabric of everyday life. Rather than relying on formal sanctions, such as legal repercussions, the mahalla enforces behavioral standards through negative informal sanctions, such as gossip, or exclusion. As a result, individuals tend to conform to communal expectations, not out of fear of legal reprisals such as arrests, but to avoid social penalties, such as isolation or the loss of communal support.

This means that while deviations from socially expected behaviors doesn't result in formal legal penalties, residents generally strive to adhere to the rules and norms of their mahalla, in order to avoid social repercussions such as social ostracism or exclusion from benefits and services.

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<sup>11</sup> Matilda Bogner, "From House to House: Abuses by Mahalla Committees," *Human Rights Watch Vol. 15, No. 7(D)* (Human Rights Watch (HRW), September 2003), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/09/22/house-house-abuses-mahalla-committees>, 2.

<sup>12</sup> OERTX, "Elements of Culture", <https://oertx.highered.texas.gov/courseware/lesson/1995/overview>

<sup>13</sup> "Sanction | Definition," Docmckee.com, June 10, 2024, <https://docmckee.com/oer/soc/sociology-glossary/sanction-definition/>.

Another example is the allocation of social assistance by the Mahalla Committees. While formally authorized by the state, they operate with “few objective criteria and little external control”, which effectively transforms social assistance into a tool for norm enforcement<sup>14</sup>. This discretion allows local officials to reward residents who adhere to the desired norms, while pressuring others – usually women or independent Muslims – to adjust their behavior in compliance with government-directed norms.

As documented extensively by Human Rights Watch (2003), Mahalla Committees have often used their discretionary power to coerce conformity and punish dissenters. For example, in October 2001, a woman whose husband and male relatives had been imprisoned on accusations of being religious extremists, was denied social assistance for her children. The head of her mahalla told her, “*You are a family of terrorists, of “Wahhabis,” enemies of the people and we won’t give you any help.*”<sup>15</sup> Another woman in a comparable situation recounted being told by her mahalla chairman, “*You have to understand that there is pressure from above. We are forced to say such things.*”<sup>16</sup> Rasanayagam has examined how the label “Wahhabi” is used by states to describe any religious activity that is unfamiliar or not sanctioned by the state<sup>17</sup>.

Participation in communal life, adherence to traditional family roles, and alignment with state-approved religious practices have all been reinforced through the threat of exclusion from social support mechanisms. Thus, while ostensibly designed to promote social welfare, the mahalla also functions as a means of social regulation and behavioral conformity, illustrating what Foucault describes as biopower – the subtle mechanisms through which modern institutions administer bodies and manage life.

### 2.2.2. Political Instrumentalization

In addition to enforcing social norms, the mahalla has historically been utilized as a tool of political control and state surveillance. Many scholars argue that this function has roots in the Soviet period, when Mahalla Committees cultivated close ties with the local police

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<sup>14</sup> Bogner, “From House to House,” 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Johan Rasanayagam, “I’m Not a Wahhabi: State Power and Muslim Orthodoxy in Uzbekistan,” in *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe*, ed. C. Hann (Munich: Lit Verlag, 2006), 99–124.

(*militsiya*), assisting in monitoring community members to curb delinquency<sup>18</sup>. During this era, the mahalla and its social meeting places, such as the teahouse, also became a platform for disseminating Communist Party ideology. This legacy of collaboration has persisted into the post-Soviet period, as the Uzbek state continues to depend on mahallas to gather reliable information on inhabitants and enforce conformity to state policy.

The Human Rights Watch (2003) report documents numerous instances of abuses perpetrated by mahalla authorities against its citizens on behalf of the government. These include surveillance and information gathering on residents' activities, extrajudicial punishment and public denunciation, discrimination denial of social assistance, obstructing female-initiated divorce (thereby enabling domestic violence), and even forced resettlement<sup>19</sup>. In essence, while the mahalla is often framed as a space of community solidarity and welfare provision, it has simultaneously served as a conduit for enforcing both social norms and political conformity, often through mechanisms of informal coercion and the enforcement of state repression.

Moreover, the report highlights that Mahalla Committee members themselves are subject to top-down pressure. While nominally autonomous committees report directly to the district government (*hokimiyat*), who are headed by a *hokim*. The *hokim* are directly appointed and dismissed by the President, which already indicates state intervention<sup>20</sup>. As Human Rights Watch notes, if a committee chairman refuses to carry out the repressive policies of the government, they are often called to answer for themselves in front of the *hokimiyat* and can even be dismissed of their post. In one instance, a mahalla in Tashkent reportedly received a letter reprimanding him from the Ministry of Internal Affairs after issuing two positive references for young men that had been suspected of involvement in "extremist activities"<sup>21</sup>.

### 2.3. The Mahalla as Pillar of Social Stability and Welfare

This section examines scholarship that highlights the positive functions of the mahalla, emphasizing its role in maintain social cohesion, political stability, and community welfare

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<sup>18</sup> Victoria Koroteyeva and Ekaterina Makarova, "The Assertion of Uzbek National Identity: Nativization or State-Building Process?," in *Post-Soviet Central Asia*, ed. Touraj Atabaki and John O'Kane (I.B.Tauris, 1998), 137–43, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755619801.ch-010>, 140.

<sup>19</sup> Bogner, "From House to House," 13-22.

<sup>20</sup> "Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan," art. 102, *The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations*, <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/uzbekistan/constitution-republic-uzbekistan>.

<sup>21</sup> Bogner, "From House to House," 23.

in Uzbekistan. In contrast to the political upheaval and civil conflict experiences by neighboring states – such as the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997) and repeated regime changes in Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan has remained comparatively stable since its independence. Scholars such as Urinboyev or Ilkhamov argue that one possible explanation are the cohesion and compliance created by the mahalla. The following subsections explore two key dimensions of this argument. First, how mahallas have served as mechanisms of social order and political stability; and second, how they have historically functioned as vital providers of welfare and mutual assistance at the community level.

### 2.3.1. Mahalla as a Mechanism of Social Cohesion and Political Stability

The mahalla has historically served as a powerful mechanism of social cohesion, functioning both as a regulator of community behavior and a stabilizing force in times of political uncertainty – such as the 1990s. Before its formalization, the mahalla operated primarily through the reinforcement of cooperative relations and norms.

Similarly, mahalla norms extended deep into private life, governing behavior in spheres ranging from attire to marital relations. The failure to comply with these norms might lead to non-legal sanctions, such as exclusion, which ensures that “every resident tries to conform to norms established in the mahalla.”<sup>22</sup> Several scholars suggest that this inherent capacity for informal regulation positioned mahallas as effective instrument of Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991.

Urinboyev contends that the post-independence reforms were integral to understandings the country’s “extraordinary political stability”, as policymakers used welfare strategies to “buy off the sympathy and loyalty of the general population towards the state”<sup>23</sup>. Through these reforms, social policy was transformed into an effective and legitimate tool to extend state power nationwide. Ilkhamov further characterizes the Uzbek regimes success in neutralizing both internal and external challenges as the result of its ability to blend “formal and informal, modern and traditional institutions and practices”, a hybrid configuration that

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<sup>22</sup> Rustamjon Urinboyev, “Law, Social Norms and Welfare as Means of Public Administration: Case Study of Mahalla Institutions in Uzbekistan,” *NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy* 4, no. 1 (July 1, 2011): 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10110-011-0002-8>, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 34.

he terms as “neo-patrimonial authoritarianism”<sup>24</sup>. This dynamic allowed the state to exploit long standing community structures to enhance its control.

### 2.3.2. Mahalla as a provider of Social Welfare and Mutual Assistance

Beyond its role in enforcing social cohesion and stability, the mahalla has also served as a critical provider of social welfare and mutual assistance, particularly in the absence of a comprehensive welfare state after the collapse of the USSR. Sievers succinctly summarizes this by explaining that “(...) the economic significance of mahalla has shifted from being a vehicle through which to amass additional or disposable wealth to a vehicle for basic survival.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in the tumultuous years after independence, Uzbekistan could not afford a soviet welfare system, and the mahalla assumed the functions of the welfare state and adapted its functions in order to adapt to these new economic conditions. Sievers highlights how the mahalla, equipped with local knowledge, “can ensure that the truly needy individuals do not fall through the cracks, (...), and that individuals who enjoy strong family support do not absorb funds more humanely spent on the truly needy.”<sup>26</sup> With considerable discretionary power and no formal appeals process, Mahalla Committee make determinations based on community standards rather than rigid legal criteria.

Micklewright and Marnie observed that while this discretion raises concerns of favoritism and potential corruption, benefits do tend to be delivered more frequently to the less well-off than to the better-off<sup>27</sup>. Yet the mahalla’s welfare role extends well beyond formal benefit distributions. Urinboyev describes the mahalla as a “multidimensional social safety nets,” functioning simultaneously as a market, a social network, and a membership institution<sup>28</sup>. Mahalla-based entrepreneurs, traders frequently provide co residents with seasonal employment opportunities and information about jobs abroad, particularly Russia or Kazakhstan. This underscores the mahallas role in facilitating income and livelihood strategies. A deeply embedded social norm of mutual assistance, known as *hashar*, has long

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<sup>24</sup> Alisher Ilkhamov, “Neopatrimonialism, Interest Groups and Patronage Networks: The Impasses of the Governance System in Uzbekistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 1 (March 2007): 65–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930701423491>, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Eric Sievers, “Uzbekistan’s Mahalla: From Soviet to Absolutist Residential Community Associations,” *The Journal of International and Comparative Law at Chicago-Kent*: Volume 2 (January 2002): 91–158. 103.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>27</sup> John Micklewright and Sheila Marnie, “Targeting Social Assistance in a Transition Economy: The Mahallas in Uzbekistan,” *Social Policy and Administration* 39, no. 4 (August 2005): 431–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2005.00448.x>, 455.

<sup>28</sup> Urinboyev, “Law, Social Norms and Welfare as Means of Public Administration,” 47.

complemented these economic functions<sup>29</sup>. In the absence of formal legal mechanisms, mahalla residents routinely cooperate to provide support for house repairs, weddings, funerals, and a variety of other services. Following the adoption of the Mahalla Law, this tradition became partially formalized, with mahalla leaders mobilizing residents for community cleanups and preparations for national holidays.

Seiple further emphasized that the mahalla became a vehicle for basic survival after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result of drastic changes in the welfare system, the mahalla assumed the functions of the welfare state, a place where “(...) group members look out for each other, collectively parenting their children, connecting friends and family to jobs, distributing funds to those in need and submitting to the judgment of elders.”<sup>30</sup> Despite occasional concerns about corruption and favoritism, the mahalla remains widely valued as a social safety net that simultaneously ensures the enforcement moral ideas of solidary and mutual help. This duality of providing welfare while reinforcing community norms, ensures that mahalla remain deeply embedded in Uzbek society as indispensable mechanisms of both social control and social support.

However, Micklewright and Marnie have also noted several disadvantages to the structure of this welfare system. This allocation of funds rest of discretionary means, which could mean that subjectivity and arbitrariness of the mahalla officials is indeed a risk, and might result in discrimination, for example against ethnic or religious minorities<sup>31</sup>. The lack of any appeal mechanism against decisions will aggravate these problems. In the absence of comprehensive official data, it remains difficult to assess whether these social-welfare programs truly ensure equitable distribution, with data becoming less available over time, which might be a reflection the increasing controls exerted by the state over the availability of data and information.

## 2.4. Conclusion

This literature review has explored the different scholarly approaches to understanding power and control, with a particular focus on Foucault’s concepts, which provide a foundational framework for understanding how modern states govern. Central to this understanding is the concept of *governmentality*, or the “art of governing” that operates

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Seiple, “Uzbekistan: Civil Society in the Heartland,” *Orbis* Vol. 49, no. 2 (March 2005): 245–59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2005.01.011>, 251.

<sup>31</sup> Micklewright and Marnie, “Targeting Social Assistance in a Transition Economy,” 435.

through diffuse, everyday mechanisms rather than overt coercion. These concepts have been applied to various studies on Central Asia. Scholars such as Adams and Rustemova, or Burnashev, show that governance in Central Asia increasingly operates through the surveillance and regulation of everyday life. Private matters – such as religious practice, ethnic identity, and family structure, are rendered public and governable, while issues like elections or state accountability are depoliticized. This reversal of the private and public sphere is emblematic of authoritarian governmentality, where power is embedded in the minutiae of daily life. Lemon and Thibault's work on Tajikistan further highlights how biopolitical and disciplinary strategies are used to shape citizens' identities and behaviors, reinforcing state legitimacy not only through repression but through productive power.

Building on this broader context, the following sections focused on the mahalla as a concrete institutional expression of these power dynamics. While often idealized as a site of mutual aid and tradition, the mahalla simultaneously operates as a surveillance apparatus and moral regulator. As shown by Human Rights Watch and scholars like Urinboyev and Ilkhamov, it functions as a dual-use institution – providing welfare and cohesion on one hand, while enabling political conformity and social control on the other.

In conclusion, this review demonstrated that the mahalla cannot be understood purely as a traditional social unit or a top-down extension of authoritarian control. It is a hybrid institution through which governmentality is localized and made effective. The state's power in Uzbekistan is not simply imposed from above but is reproduced from below – through the enforcement of norms and social sanctions by neighbors, friends and family members. Thus, the literature confirms the value of a Foucauldian lens in exploring how the Uzbek state governs through different governmentality rhetoric, and not merely through repression.

## CHAPTER II: THEORY AND CONCEPTS

### 1. Introduction

This chapter establishes the theoretical architecture upon which the subsequent analysis is built, offering a genealogy of state power and the modalities through which governance is exercised. It outlines the major conceptual frameworks that illuminate how states, such as Uzbekistan, deploy both coercive and non-coercive means to govern populations.

The enforcement of state authority over populations has been a subject of profound theorization. According to Thomas Hobbes, the state emerges as a necessary response to the chaotic potential of the state of nature, embodying the Leviathan that prevents the war of all against all<sup>32</sup>. In Hobbesian terms, the state's legitimacy derives from its capacity to monopolize violence and impose order. Similarly, Max Weber famously defined the modern state as "a compulsory political organization with continuous operations will be called a 'state' insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order."<sup>33</sup> Weber's notion of the state thus positions it as the sole legitimate wielder of coercive force within a certain territory. According to Weber, the state enforces its power through a combination of legal authority, bureaucratic administration, and, when necessary, coercive force. This coercion can range from policing and legal penalties to more extreme measures like military intervention.

Antonio Gramsci, by contrast, emphasized the importance of hegemony – a form of cultural and ideological leadership through which the ruling class secures consent from the governed<sup>34</sup>. Rather than relying solely on coercion, the state maintains control by cultivating common sense, norms, and values that align the interests of the populace with those of the ruling elite. In this framework, institutions like education, religion, and the media play central roles in producing consent, making coercion a last resort rather than a constant necessity.

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<sup>32</sup> However, one can argue that Hobbes was writing during the English civil war, which explains the need for a strong centralized government.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Shaw, "The State of Globalization: Towards a Theory of State Transformation," *Review of International Political Economy* 4, no. 3 (1997): 497–513, <https://doi.org/10.1080/096922997347724>, 499.

<sup>34</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 57.

However, this thesis primarily draws on the work of Michel Foucault, whose contributions offer a more diffuse and immanent model of power. Foucault's concepts of governmentality, disciplinary power, and biopower allow for a deeper interrogation of how power is exercised not merely through violence or laws, but through institutions, norms, knowledge systems, and daily practices that shape individuals into governable subjects.

While the definition of power often seems quite self-evident – as the hierarchical imposition where the powerful coercing the weak – such a simplistic view fails to capture the complexity and nuance of the concept. Early theorists like Max Weber defined power as “(...) the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which that probability rests.”<sup>35</sup> While this definition already positions power as relational, its scope remains limited, as it does not take into account that power can be dispersed, and productive nature of power in modern states. Similarly, Barry Hindess's distinction between “power over” and “power to” also proves too reductive to correctly access the modern enforcement of power, which does not solely rely on top-down enforcement of power<sup>36</sup>.

Since the early 20th century, conceptualizations of state power have undergone significant transformation, shifting away from a sole emphasis on coercion and sovereignty toward more diffuse and immanent forms of control. It is here that Foucault's contributions offer critical insights while challenging these traditional notions of power. Refusing to treat power as something that can be possessed, Foucault instead frames it as relational – it is not held but exercised, and inherent to all social practices<sup>37</sup>.

This means that power is never exercised in a vacuum – it is always entangled with discourse, ritual, and representation. The rhetorical construction of tradition, particularly through formalization and symbolic investment, plays a central role in how institutions like the mahalla are rendered legitimate. The following sections elaborate these dynamics in detail.

This thesis, therefore, draws primarily on Foucault's framework to analyze how power circulates within and through the Uzbek mahalla. The mahalla occupies a unique position, situated between a mechanism of social welfare and an apparatus of surveillance,

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<sup>35</sup> Mitchell Dean, *The Signature of Power*, 1st edition (Sage Publications Ltd, 2014), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 84.

normalization, and control. In tracing the micropolitics of governance and the localization of authority, this chapter illustrates how the mahalla acts as an essential part within a broader, localized capillary network of state power.

## 2. From Above and Below: Modalities of Power in Contemporary Governance

In his lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault explored the evolution of the logic of governmentality. He argued that the Christian pastorate that emerged around the third century gave rise to an art of directing, leading, manipulating and monitoring men, describing it as an “art with the function of taking charge of men collectively and individually throughout their life and at every moment of their existence.”<sup>38</sup> According to him, this moment marked the moment of origin, the embryonic stage of what would later develop into “governmentality”. This concept would later enter into politics between the 16th and 18th centuries, signaling the threshold of the birth of the modern state.

According to Foucault, modern power is positive rather than negative, meaning that it is “productive” rather than prohibitive or repressive. Modern power encourages certain behaviors beyond simply forbidding and repressing undesirable behavior.

Central to Foucault’s analysis is the continuous search for a new conception of power, which allows to expand beyond the traditional understanding of sovereign power – he firmly rejected the theory of sovereignty and its key concepts such as law, legitimacy and right, instead seeking to redefine power through its more diffuse and dynamic operations<sup>39</sup>.

### 2.1. Governmentality and the Logic of the Modern State

James C. Scott’s raises a critical question about modern state power: *can we domesticate the state, or will it domesticate us?*<sup>40</sup>. This skepticism toward centralized authority complements Foucault’s concept of governmentality, which refers to the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics through

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 165.

<sup>39</sup> Dean, *The Signature of Power*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> James C. Scott, “Can we domesticate the state or will it domesticate us?”, *In Pursuit of Development*. 14 April 2021. <https://in-pursuit-of-development.simplecast.com/episodes/james-scott-feHrKMOF>. (14:55). Host: Dan Banik

which power is exercised over populations<sup>41</sup>. It marks a shift from overt sovereign rule to more diffuse forms of governance embedded in everyday life.

Governmentality, in Foucault's terms, is the "art of government" – a way of managing populations not through direct force, but through knowledge, regulation, and normalization. Governmentality is the state logic that weaves together different types of power in order to assert itself over the population<sup>42</sup>. Dean further breaks down the "governmentalization of the state" into four aspects, including the elaboration of practices and rationalities of government and the emergence of a distinctively nonpolitical sphere that appears outside the state but is essential to its functioning<sup>43</sup>. In the case of the mahalla, this "non-political" domain becomes the very terrain through which the state governs: through welfare, social norms, and informal surveillance, rather than laws or visible coercion,

This is especially important in authoritarian governmentality, where governance relies less on individual freedom and more on passive obedience and the containment of dissent. In Uzbekistan, the mahalla exemplifies this model. It functions not as a sovereign agent, but as a decentralized extension of state power – one that normalizes governance through moral authority, data collection, and traditional embeddedness.

## 2.2. The Tripartite Power Model: Sovereign Power, Disciplinary Power, Biopower

While governmentality is the rationality behind the deployment of power, Foucault conceptualized a "triangle" of three modalities through which power is excised. He argues that these types of power should be understood as forming a "triangle: sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management, which has population as its main target and the apparatuses of security as its essential mechanism."<sup>44</sup>

### 2.2.1. Sovereign Power

When tracing the historical evolution of power, Michel Foucault identifies sovereign power as its most traditional and visible form. This power is conceptualized as the ability to use violence or the threat of death to maintain control over the population. As Foucault wrote, "The power of the sword, the power to kill, is the most obvious form of sovereign

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<sup>41</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Dean, *Governmentality*, 122.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 107-108.

power.”<sup>45</sup> This form of power is quite centralized and hierarchical, often associated with one central figure or institution, such as a monarch or a state, which holds the ultimate “right to take life or let live.”<sup>46</sup> This formulation encapsulates its essence – it is not just the ability to kill, but also to expose their life to the potential of death, for example by conscripting them into war<sup>47</sup>. The symbol of sovereign power is the sword.

However, sovereign power is not only about war or execution, but also about the right to prohibit, exclude and repress. Foucault characterizes it as “(...) essentially a negative power, a power to say ‘no’ to prohibit, to exclude, to repress”<sup>48</sup>. That is, its function is largely to restrict – to define the limits of behavior, space, and legitimacy through the imposition of absolute commands and prohibitions. It’s a negative power, meaning that it takes away – whether through taxation, conscription, incarceration, or death – rather than being a power that produces.

Yet, Foucault emphasized that in modern society, power is no longer exercised primarily through these repressive mechanisms. Over time, sovereign power has become just one component within a broader, more dispersed, and more intricate regime of governance. With the bureaucratization of modern life and the rise of new social institutions, power has shifted towards more subtle forms that aim not only to punish, but also to shape and organize life. As Foucault notes, this marks the transition from a power to “take life” to a power that seeks to “ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put life in order.”<sup>49</sup>

This shift becomes evident when examining the changing logic of war and execution over time. Wars, once waged in the name of a sovereign ruler, began to be justified through appeals of ensuring the survival of a people, race, or way of life. Nowadays, the logic of war has become increasingly selective and strategic – no longer demanding universal sacrifice from citizen-armies, but instead relying on professionalized militaries. Similarly, the decline of public executions and the rise of penal reform reflect a reorientation of political rationality: societies no longer glorify death as sovereign spectacle but focus on the preservation and regulation of life. As Foucault notes, “One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others.”<sup>50</sup> This shift in logics reflects a

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<sup>45</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 136.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel von Pufendorf, *Le Droit de la nature*, trans. Jean Barbeyrac (Amsterdam: Pierre de Coup, 1734), 445.

<sup>48</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 83.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*.

gradual transition toward a biopolitical and disciplinary regime, where eliminating life is rationalized through appeals to collective health and security.

Indeed, beginning in the 17th century, power over life evolved in two interlinked modalities. Firstly, disciplinary power, which focuses on the body of the individual – rendering it more efficient, obedient, and useful. Secondly, biopower, which concerns itself with regulating populations as biological and political collectives. This dual transformation marks the advent of productive power: a form no longer rooted solely in domination or prohibition, but in the cultivation of subjects through norms, institutions, and knowledge regimes. This had crucial implications on the concept of sovereignty which, having first taken a juridical form, is democratized, and anchored in the rights of the legal and political subject<sup>51</sup>. Laws and law-like regulations are now the privileged instruments of sovereignty, which has itself transformed from a juridical system to an instrument of a normative order, which is part of complex apparatuses of normalizing practices<sup>52</sup>.

As Foucault puts it: “I do not mean to say that the law fades into the background or that the institutions of justice tend to disappear, but rather that the law operates more and more as a norm, and that the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory.”<sup>53</sup> This reconceptualization of law situates it within a continuum of disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms, transforming sovereignty from a legal doctrine into a node within governmental practice.

Building on this, Mitchell Dean argues that the legal evolution of sovereignty provided not only a set of instruments, but also a framework for legitimizing the expansion of governance and disciplinary practices<sup>54</sup>. In this context, sovereignty is no longer a purely repressive tool, but a strategic site through which liberal and neoliberal governmentalities operate.

### 2.2.2. Disciplinary Power

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault explores the emergence of disciplinary power as a dominant mode of social control in modern societies. Unlike sovereign power, which used

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<sup>51</sup> Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010), 122.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 144.

<sup>54</sup> Dean, *Governmentality*, 130.

to be exercised through overt displays of force and punitive spectacle, disciplinary power is subtle, diffuse, and insidious. It does not operate through public whippings or executions, but through institutions such as prisons, schools, and factories – spaces where the conduct of individuals is constantly scrutinized, corrected, and shaped. Disciplinary power inserts itself into the fabric of everyday life, slowly molding individuals in ordinary and repetitive routines that come to define the ‘normal’ citizen.

One of the strongest metaphors used to describe this system is Bentham’s Panopticon – a circular prison in which inmates are permanently visible to both each-other and an unseen observer. This system represents the ideal of the economy of power where control is achieved not through physical force but through the psychological pressure of possible observation and punishment. By “economy of power,” Foucault refers to the mechanisms that enable the exercise of power in the least costly way possible<sup>55</sup>. In the panopticon, constant surveillance becomes internalized, meaning that individuals regulate their own behavior as if always being watched by an invisible observer. Indeed, this form of power is efficient, strategic and low-cost – relying not on brute coercion but on the subject’s own internalized sense of being watched. As Foucault writes, “Disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility.”<sup>56</sup> The subject begins to function as if constantly observed, even in the absence of a direct watcher. Surveillance becomes self-surveillance. Individuals are compelled to regulate their own behavior not through fear of punishment, but through a desire to conform to what they imagine is expected. This constant possibility of being seen, of being evaluated, instils a regime of self-discipline, where the power is no longer external but internal. This internalization of the expected behavior makes this power more pervasive.

Disciplinary power is therefore not merely repressive, but productive. It does not just prohibit, but actively constructs subjects. Foucault notes that, “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.”<sup>57</sup> This productive quality marks a significant departure from earlier understandings of power as primarily prohibitive. Disciplinary power doesn’t

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<sup>55</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 80.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 170

merely restrict action; it constitutes identities. It produces docile bodies and obedient citizens – subjects who internalize the values of the institution.

Central to this form of power is the Norm. The norm is not merely a statistical average or legal boundary; it is a prescriptive ideal. It defines what is healthy, sane, moral, productive, or legitimate. As Foucault explains, “The power of the Norm appears through the disciplines. It is a power that is not only the right to decide between what is normal and what is not, but also the power to make people conform to the norm.”<sup>58</sup> Disciplinary power operates through standards – standards that are constantly measures, taught, and reinforced through various institution.

Development of institutions have evolved not just to serve administrative or social functions, but to function as mechanisms of state power, with power becoming decentralized through these everyday institutions<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, power is no longer conceptualized as something the state “has” but it is something that is exercised continuously, often invisibly, and diffused through the very institutions that serve us.

In the context of this thesis, disciplinary power is crucial to understanding how the mahalla embeds state authority at the most intimate level. Its strength lies not in coercion, but in the internalization and adherence to routines, social expectations, and moral norms. These micro-technologies of power allow the state to govern through everyday practices, making the mahalla a site of both care and control.

### 2.2.3. Biopower

The birth of biopower would have been impossible without the prior birth of disciplinary power and the institutions that served to discipline (schools, prisons, factories), a time during which diverse techniques for subjugating and disciplining the body emerged<sup>60</sup>. The development of discipline thus was the starting point of the development of biopower.

Biopolitics goes beyond the ordinary forms of governance and refers to how governmental power is no longer primarily concerned with “society,” nor with the corporal body of the individual. The introduction of biopower, the notion of the “social body” emerges – a population now becomes the problem that power needs to subdue and regulate. Foucault

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 141.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 139-40.

argues that modern power is increasingly preoccupied with the broader governance of populations, rather than with the regulation of individual acts.

“Biopower is a power that is concerned with the management of life, with the optimization of life processes, and with the regulation of populations.”<sup>61</sup> This quote highlights the shift from the power to take life to the power to manage and optimize life. Biopower’s legitimacy derives from its claim to optimize its populations life through mechanisms such as welfare – while simultaneously invoking fear of the unknown dangers that threaten it: scarcity, famine, epidemics, or moral decline.

Furthermore, biopolitics is a form of politics entailing the administration of the processes of life of populations<sup>62</sup>. It is concerned with matters of life and death, with birth and propagation, with health and illness, and with the processes that sustain or retard the optimization of the life of a population<sup>63</sup>. This means that biopolitics is concerned with the social, cultural, environmental, economic, and geographic conditions of the population.

This management necessarily includes the division of populations into sub-groups that are perceived to either contribute to or endanger the collective welfare and life – categories such as the criminal, degenerate, unemployed, or the abnormal<sup>64</sup>. Modern governance seeks to contain, reform, or exclude those deemed threatening to its normative ideal.

In the case of the mahalla, these biopolitical logics become strikingly visible. Mahalla Committees keep detailed registers of their residents, tracking demographic data, such as the number of unemployed, disabled, or single parents, but also moral and behavioral categories like “gossips” or “scandalous families.”<sup>65</sup> These statistics are then transferred to the local government (*hokimiyat*), or even sometimes the local police, demonstrating how the mahalla acts as a micro-level apparatus of biopolitical governance.

This practice reflects Foucault’s insight that modern power increasingly governs through the categorization and regulation of life itself, blurring the line between care and control, and transforming traditional community structures into agents of state rationality. In doing so, the mahalla helps produce a what Scott coined as a “legible population”<sup>66</sup>. The mahalla

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>62</sup> Dean, *Governmentality*, 117.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>65</sup> Bogner, “From House to House,” 10.

<sup>66</sup> Venkatesh Rao, “A Big Little Idea Called Legibility,” ribbonfarm, July 26, 2010, <https://www.ribbonfarm.com/2010/07/26/a-big-little-idea-called-legibility/>.

renders the population statistically understandable, translating private life into administrative visibility.

### 2.3. Power from Below and Capillary Control and Everyday Governance

Therefore, Foucault's work provides a comprehensive understanding of power that extends both broadly within the tripartite system, and finely through the micro-practices that constitute everyday life. His analysis invites us to look beyond centralized institutions and instead trace the mechanisms through which power circulates at the most local and ordinary levels of society. As he states in *Discipline and Punish*, power needs to be distributed differently, making it "(...) capable of operating everywhere, in a continuous way, down to the finest grain of the social body."<sup>67</sup>

Foucault demonstrates that modern power is local, continuous, and productive – or simply “capillary”, meaning that it operates at the lowest extremities of social life, and is embedded in everyday interactions, behaviors, and practices<sup>68</sup>. This means that power does not rest solely but touches every aspect of society and life. As he writes in *Society Must Be Defended* (1976): “Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, power is not simply imposed from above – rather, it flows horizontally and vertically, permeating social relations and norms. It is enacted and reinforced by ordinary individuals, institutions, and practices, often without the need for direct social coercion. Capillary power means that everyone becomes both a subject of power and a vehicle of the exercise of power. Teachers, parents, neighbors, bureaucrats – all participate in maintaining systems of control by upholding norms, enforcing expectations, and defining what is acceptable and not. This is especially significant in contexts like the Uzbek mahalla, where everyday governance is conducted by community members who simultaneously protect, monitor, and normalize.

However, far from being passive transmitters of top-down authority, capillary sites of power are also potential spaces of negotiation, contestation, and resistance<sup>70</sup>. Thus, these everyday nodes of power – whether they are families, local committees, are not merely

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<sup>67</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions,” *Praxis International* 1, no. 3 (1981): 272–287, 276.

<sup>69</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (Longueuil, Québec: Point Par Point, 1976), 94.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell Dean, *The Signature of Power*, 1st edition (Sage Publications Ltd, 2014), 22-23.

instruments of domination, but also potential sites of contestation, where norms may be both reinforced and subverted.

By examining these dynamics, I argue that understanding contemporary state power requires more than identifying where coercion is exercised – it demands a deeper analysis of how norms, discourses, and administrative practices are woven into the very fabric of life. The tools of power have multiplied and dispersed, and so too must our theoretical frameworks for tracking them. This transformation from sword to norm, from spectacle to subtlety, sets the stage for analyzing how institutions like the mahalla in Uzbekistan operate as localized embodiments of this broader shift in the logic of power.

#### 2.4. Security as Governance: Foucault's Contribution to Securitization Theory

While Foucault is more associated with the previously mentioned concepts of discipline or biopolitics, his later lectures – particularly those compiled in *Security, Territory, Population*, lay the foundations for the concept of security. Unlike the classical notions that conceptualize security primarily as the protection of the state from external threats, Foucault emphasizes its internal function – it's a mechanism for managing the own population, organizing life and regulating risk. Security constitutes a mode of power that operates preventively, aiming to reduce uncertainty and anticipate potential disruptions to social order.

Foucault refers to security as a *dispositif* (sometimes translated as device or apparatus) – “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements... in short, the said as much as the unsaid. (...) The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.”<sup>71</sup> Wichum explains, governmentality studies treat security not as a self-evident good, but as a “strategical effect of specific relations of power, knowledge, and subjectivity.”<sup>72</sup> This means that security is not just a response to risk; it produces its own truths, categories, and subject positions. It constitutes a discourse that defines what counts as a threat, and who is considered threatening. Governance, in this

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<sup>71</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194.

<sup>72</sup> Ricky Wichum, “Security as Dispositif: Michel Foucault in the Field of Security,” *Foucault Studies* 1, no. 15 (February 2013): 164–71, <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i15.3996>, 165.

light, becomes less about force and more about the discursive and material construction of danger and deviance.

Foucault argues the existence of a triangle formed between sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management, which has population as its main target and apparatuses of security as its essential mechanism<sup>73</sup>. These security apparatuses are described as the essential technical instrument of “governmentality”. This highlights how modern states do not rely on one form of power alone; instead, they operate through a combination of techniques – overlapping and mutually reinforcing – to govern populations via infrastructures of normalization, surveillance and control.

The population is the central object of security governance and is thus treated as a field of governmental intervention. Populations are governed through regularities and modifiable variables<sup>74</sup>. These variables are precisely those monitored by the Mahalla Committees, where local authorities collect extensive data on residents’ religious habits, family structures, and perceived deviance, often categorizing individuals into risk groups. In this context, freedom, is not an inherent right but a conditionally granted status, granted only to those whose conduct aligns with state norms<sup>75</sup>. Obedience becomes the prerequisite to freedom, but only within the boundaries defined and approved by the state-sanctioned moral order.

Another defining feature of security as a *dispositif* is its orientation toward the future, with logics of prevention and precaution. Unlike sovereignty, which reacts to transgressions, or discipline, which trains the body, security is concerned with pre-emptive governance – acting on the possibility of danger before it manifests. Foucault emphasizes that security strategies operate as a management of “open series [that] can only be controlled by an estimate of probabilities.”<sup>76</sup> This preventive logic helps explain the state’s approach to regulating Islam in Uzbekistan. Authorized religious institutions are tightly monitored, while unregistered or independent forms of religious expression are treated as latent threats to national security. Through selective recognition and surveillance, religion is reframed not merely as belief but as a zone of risk to be managed.

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<sup>73</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 107-8.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 74

<sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63-64.

<sup>76</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 20.

In conclusion, Foucault's concept of security reveals how modern governance operates through anticipatory interventions and discourse that justifies this intervention. This helps illuminate how both religion and institutions like the mahalla are transformed into managed spaces of obedience, crucial to the construction of regime securitization. The securitization of religious expression must therefore be understood as a rational and strategic outcome of modern modes of governance.

### 3. Invented Traditions and the Politics of Legitimacy

#### 3.1. Inventing the Mahalla: Tradition as Governance

Invented traditions are cultural practices that are presented or perceived as ancient and immutable but are, in reality, of recent and deliberate origins. This concept, introduced by Eric Hobsbawm, is particularly valuable for understanding how modern states manufacture legitimacy by anchoring contemporary governance with the symbolic weight of a mythologized past. Indeed, as defined it in the introduction to *The Invention of Traditions*, “invented tradition”, “(...) appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.”<sup>77</sup>

Hobsbawm further clarifies that the term “invented tradition” encompasses both consciously designed practices that are formally instituted, and those that arise more informally yet within a short and identifiable historical moment – practices, which nevertheless quickly take root and gain symbolic authority.

These invented traditions can be classified into three overlapping types, but the mahalla corresponds most to the second type, “establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority.”<sup>78</sup> In this light, the state's appropriation of the mahalla responds to the needs of a modernizing a politically uncertain society by crafting a seemingly ancient institution that legitimizes centralized authority while adapting to contemporary administrative functions.

Thus, the mahalla should not be viewed merely as a residual or organically preserved remnant of traditional communal life. Rather, in its current form, it must be recognized as an invented tradition strategically mobilized by the state to fulfill modern governance imperatives. While the mahalla may indeed draw upon older local communal practices, its

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<sup>77</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 10.

institutionalized form in post-Soviet Uzbekistan has been thoroughly restructured, codified, and politicized. As such, it now serves clear state-centric purposes: surveillance, welfare distribution, and the ideological reproduction of loyalty. In this transformation, the mahalla operates as both symbol and mechanism. It symbolizes cultural continuity and national identity, yet simultaneously functions as a bureaucratic node for everyday governance.

### 3.2. Ethno-symbolism and the Construction of National Identity

Anthony D. Smith, one of the foundational figures in nationalism studies, critiques the modernist assertion that nations are entirely recent and artificially constructed entities. Instead, the ethno-symbolist approach suggests that modern nations are built upon the foundations of myths, symbols, and collective memories that are reinterpreted to confer legitimacy upon the modern nation-state.

Accordingly, nations are not simply invented from scratch – they are forged through the selective reinterpretation of older historical and cultural continuities. This theory is particularly pertinent in the case of Uzbekistan, where both Soviet and post-Soviet regimes engaged in extensive nation-building.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire, the Soviet authorities initiated a deliberate campaign of “Uzbekifying” Uzbekistan. As part of Stalin’s broader nationalities policy in the 1920s, the borders of Central Asia were redrawn to dismantle pre-existing political loyalties and ensure ethnic fragmentation. As scholars such as Seiple argue, this territorial demarcation served multiple purposes: to break the potential influence of historical political structures such as the khanates, to divide emerging ethnic identities and prevent unified nationalist movements, and finally, to ensure long-term dependence on Moscow for political direction and reliance on Russian as a unifying language<sup>79</sup>. This nation-building process required not only new borders but also the active construction, and at times invention, of national traditions and symbols. Figures like Tamerlane, who historically predated the formation of the Uzbek ethnos, were recast as national heroes, woven into an emerging state-sponsored historical narrative.

Laruelle argues that while nations are a modern construct but are built upon some preexisting cultural and ethnic roots, which are reinterpreted and instrumentalized in order

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<sup>79</sup> Seiple, “Uzbekistan: Civil Society in the Heartland,” 250.

to forge a sense of historical continuity and cultural legitimacy. In post-Soviet Uzbekistan, this logic took the form of both cultural and political nationalism.

Under President Islam Karimov, the Uzbek regime effectively mobilized this idea to fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through the creation of a national metanarrative and the revival of reinvented traditions, the state sought to cultivate loyalty, coherence, and legitimacy<sup>80</sup>.

This conceptualization will guide the following analysis of the modern mahalla and its evolution. Though presented as an enduring tradition, the mahalla has been significantly restructured, institutionalized, and repurposed by the various following regimes that controlled Uzbekistan.

#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter traced the evolution of state power, and the different mechanisms employed by governmentality. Drawing primarily of Michel Foucault concepts of governmentality, the tripartite power model, and securitization, it has illustrated how modern governance no longer operates simply through coercion, but through the normalization of conduct, the surveillance of everyday life, and the strategic production of obedient subjects. In the case of Uzbekistan, institutions like the mahalla are not peripheral to state power – but are central in the distribution of capillary power nodes.

By extending Foucault's work into the domain of security, this chapter has shown that security is also no longer merely about the protection of the state from external threats, but a mode of governing the life of the own population – by constructing categories of danger and acting pre-emptively upon the population. The mahalla embodies this logic of securitization: it produces statistical knowledge about its residents, classifies them according to moral and social criteria, and enforces norms through both care and surveillance. The state's approach to religion further exemplifies this. Through the selective sanctioning of religious practice and categorization of unsanctioned expressions as threats to national security, the mahalla participates in a broader dispositive of securitization.

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<sup>80</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "The Nation Narrated: Uzbekistan's Political and Cultural Nationalism, 2018, 261-282.," in *Constructing the Uzbek State. Narratives of the Post-Soviet Years*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018), 261–82, [https://www.academia.edu/35687103/The\\_Nation\\_Narrated\\_Uzbekistan\\_s\\_Political\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Nationalism\\_in\\_Marlene\\_Laruelle\\_ed\\_Constructing\\_the\\_Uzbek\\_State\\_Narratives\\_of\\_the\\_Post\\_Soviet\\_Years\\_Lanham\\_MD\\_Lexington\\_2018\\_261\\_282](https://www.academia.edu/35687103/The_Nation_Narrated_Uzbekistan_s_Political_and_Cultural_Nationalism_in_Marlene_Laruelle_ed_Constructing_the_Uzbek_State_Narratives_of_the_Post_Soviet_Years_Lanham_MD_Lexington_2018_261_282), 262.

This thesis uses Foucault's theoretical lens to analyze how the mahalla functions as a site where religious expression is regulated, risk is managed, and legitimacy is produced. Religion repression in Uzbekistan must be understood as the rational outcome of a specific governance strategy.

## CHAPTER III: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THE

### MAHALLA SYSTEM

#### 1. Introduction

Post-communist states are frequently described as a “bricolage,” of formal and informal institutions inherited from their Soviet past – and the mahalla is no exception<sup>81</sup>. To better understand how the mahalla has evolved into a core instrument of governance in Uzbekistan’s post-independence context, it is essential to situate its development within broader historical transformations in the exercise of state power. Moreover, it is important to note that mahallas have never been monolithic or static; their forms and functions have continually shifted in response to changing political, economic, and social conditions<sup>82</sup>.

Although both colonial and Soviet regimes attempted to instrumentalize the mahalla, their efforts often fell short of embedding lasting control. What these earlier attempts lacked was not only deep social penetration, but also the ideological framework necessary to legitimize the mahalla as a governance tool. By contrast, since gaining independence, the Uzbek state has reconstituted the mahalla as both a functional administrative unit and a culturally legitimized institution. This has been achieved by aligning the mahalla with nationalist rhetoric, and contemporary governance logics. Using Foucault’s tripartite model of power, this transformation can be understood as the state’s successful embedding of authority into everyday life through both symbolic and material means.

Since 1991, official discourse has framed the mahalla as a timeless and authentically Uzbek institution that was revitalized after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This narrative commonly presents the mahalla as a surviving remnant of national heritage, untouched by occupation, and central to a broader cultural renaissance. However, scholars such as Noori challenge this idealized view, arguing that today’s mahalla is less a preserved tradition and more a product of “early Russian colonial, and later Soviet interventions.”<sup>83</sup> This interpretation aligns with broader critiques of post-soviet governance, which emphasizes institutional continuity over rupture.

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<sup>81</sup> Madeleine Reeves, Johan Rasanayagam, and Judith Beyer, *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>82</sup> Sievers, “Uzbekistan’s Mahalla,” 103-104.

<sup>83</sup> Neema Noori, “Delegating Coercion: Linking Decentralization to State Formation in Uzbekistan” (PhD Dissertation, 2006), 38.

The persistence of the mahalla in Uzbekistan's administrative system reflects this continuity. Much of its legal and bureaucratic structure remains rooted in Soviet precedent. Much of its legal and bureaucratic structure remains rooted in Soviet precedent. Yet the post-Soviet state's ability to make the mahalla *work* as a tool of both governance and legitimation – marks a key difference. What distinguishes the current form is not just institutional survival, but the symbolic and ideological architecture now supporting it: a framework that embeds state power within cultural tradition, moral regulation, and localized welfare.

This chapter therefore addresses the question: *In what ways has the structure of the mahalla evolved, and why has it become an effective instrument of state power in the post-independence period?* It traces the mahalla's transformation across three regimes – the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and independent Uzbekistan – highlighting how its function has shifted from informal self-governance to a state-embedded mechanism of control. More than a historical account, this chapter also explores how and why the mahalla has become uniquely effective today: because it fuses traditional legitimacy with the diffuse, capillary logic of modern state power.

## 2. From Local Tradition to State Apparatus: Colonial and Soviet Transformation of the Mahalla

### 2.1. Early Russian Adaptation of the Mahalla

To understand how the mahalla came to serve as a key node in the localized governance structure of modern Uzbekistan, it is necessary to trace the institution's early transformation under the Russian Empire's rule. In line with Foucault's theory of governmentality, this section demonstrates how the integration of institutions like the mahalla marked the beginning of a broader strategy of embedding state authority into the microstructures of everyday life. This process of normalization of state power is evident in the ways colonial and later Soviet administrators co-opted and transformed the institution to extend their control.

Historical studies of pre-Russian mahalla, such as Georg Geiss' study of 19th century residential communities, often rely on Soviet-era sources, which may introduce certain ideological biases. Sukhareva's extensive ethnographic literature on the mahallas of Bukhara, for example, largely omits the political context of Russian imperial rule and the potential changes it had on local culture and institutions. Nevertheless, these accounts offer

valuable insights into the social functions and structures of the mahalla, and how these institutions functioned before the imposition of external state power.

Before Russian conquest, mahallas were largely autonomous, self-contained neighborhood units. These neighborhoods of around 100 people resembled enclaves, often physically enclosed by walls, offering both physical protection and social structure for their inhabitants. One of the primary functions of the mahalla was its defensive role, safeguarding residents from steppe raiders, rival khanates and other external threats<sup>84</sup>. As Sukhaerva notes, the mahalla was not only a territorial unit, but also acted as, “a cell of the feudal city not just in a territorial sense. It was an administrative unit, with which municipal powers conducted affairs through the mahallas’ elders”<sup>85</sup>. These administrative units were headed by an *oqsoqol*, or “whitebeard”, who was elected by residents of his mahalla based on his social standing. His primary tasks were to mediate disputes, offer advice, help organize social events such as weddings or funerals, levy taxes, and represent the interests of the mahalla to higher authorities tied to local Emirs<sup>86</sup>.

Mahallas were neighborhood communities that typically included their own communal infrastructures, such as mosques, cemeteries, and public gathering places like the *chaikhona* (teahouse). Social belonging was determined by residency rather than kinship; and potential newcomers first needed to gain the approval of other residents before being able to even purchase or build a house within the mahalla. Furthermore, active participation in the community life was central and expected, with certain occasions being organized and celebrated by the whole mahalla instead of remaining solely familial gatherings – such as weddings or circumcisions<sup>87</sup>. Participation in religious life was tightly woven into communal identity, with participation in prayer and rituals expected and monitored. For instance, the *rais* (community head), monitored the attendance at morning prayers, and could impose either informal social sanctions, or physical punishments upon residents who failed to attend without a valid excuse<sup>88</sup>. Of course, these features and practices of social

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<sup>84</sup> Sievers, “Uzbekistan’s Mahalla,” 108.

<sup>85</sup> O. A. Sukhareva, *Kvartalnaya obshchina pozdnfeodal'nogo goroda Bukhary* (Tashkent: Fan, 1976), 17.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Georg Geiss, “Mahallah and Kinship Relations. A Study on Residential Communal Commitment Structures in Central Asia of the 19th Century,” *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 97–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930120055488>, 102.

<sup>88</sup> Francis Henry Skrine and Edward Denison Ross, *The Heart of Asia: A History of Russian Turkestan and the Central Asian Khanates from the Earliest Times* (Adamant Media Corporation, 2001), 381.

life, communal responsibilities, and even the physical layout of the mahalla varied greatly across the region.

Following the Russian Empire's conquest of Central Asia in the late 19th century, imperial administrators sought to govern local populations by relying heavily on statistical surveys and ethnographic research to understand the social structures, traditions and life of "natives" and attempted to apply this knowledge to govern them. As Smith notes, "expert knowledge occupies a privileged position in government and its essentially discretionary and norm-governed judgements infiltrate and colonize previous sites of power."<sup>89</sup> One of the ways that Tsarist administrators tried to learn to govern was through statistic work. According to records of the time, Tashkent consisted of 149 mahallas across four town districts at the time of occupation by Tsarist forces in 1865<sup>90</sup>. This demonstrates the intricate relationship between power, knowledge and governance, as the detailed knowledge gathered through the surveys was instrumental in the administration's efforts to control the newly conquered territories.

The conquest of Central Asia was linked to a "civilizing mission" of the Tsarist Empire, which can be divided into two distinct phases<sup>91</sup>. The first phase occurred during the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881). This period was characterized by what has been termed "pragmatic flexibility"<sup>92</sup>. During this time, the influence exerted on the local population was minimal, with a general respect for the traditional society structures, as well as the local value system. This approach aimed to integrate the newly conquered territories into the Empire with minimal disruption to the previous ways of life, while maintaining clear symbolic and spatial distinctions between imperial agents and subject communities.

This "pragmatic flexibility" is exemplified by the actions taken by the authorities on the years following the conquest. Immediately after, only one year after the conquest, the authorities attempted to introduce new political divisions to the region, with the "Provisional Statute on the Administration of the Turkestan Province", issued on August 6,

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<sup>89</sup> Carole Smith, "The Sovereign State v Foucault: Law and Disciplinary Power," *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (May 2000): 283–306, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954x.00216>, 283.

<sup>90</sup> Geiss, "Mahallah and Kinship Relations," 98.

<sup>91</sup> Antonia Schlotter, "The 'Civilizing Mission' of the Russian Empire in Central Asia in the 19th Century," *Copernico* (blog), September 18, 2024, <https://www.copernico.eu/en/articles/wherever-russian-settles-asia-country-immediately-becomes-russian-dostoevsky-civilizing-mission-russian-empire-central-asia>.

<sup>92</sup> Andreas Kappeler, "Czarist Policy toward the Muslims of the Russian Empire," in Andreas Kappeler, Gerhard Simon and Georg Brunner (eds.), *Muslim Communities Reemerge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 146.

1865. However, attempts to establishment of administrative control, taxation and regulated land use proved to be a more difficult task that anticipated<sup>93</sup>. There was a gap between the desired achievements and the actual possibilities on the ground.

The Statute “On the administration of Turkestan”, or simply the Turkestan Statute of 1886 redrew the map of some administrative territories in order to levy taxes, but did not erode the traditional lifestyle of locals. The Statute did officially rename terminology into Russian, with the term *oqsoqol*, who served as head of local police, being translated into *starshina*, meaning “elder” – a linguistic move that reflects the broader effort to overwrite indigenous forms of authority with the lexicon of imperial bureaucracy<sup>94</sup>. While the Statute does not specifically define the mahalla, it does recognize the existence of local communities and the role they play in daily life and self-governance. Administrators quickly recognized the utility of these localized community structures and incorporated them into their strategy for managing and pacifying the newly conquered territories, entrusting these community structures with a certain degree of autonomy regarding managing local affairs<sup>95</sup>. This statute remained largely in force until the 1917 revolution<sup>96</sup>.

However, this approach evolved during the reign of Alexander III (1888-1894). During this period, the initially paternalistic strategy gradually transitioned into a more overtly colonialist and controlling stance toward the region. One notable example of this shift occurred in 1892. Initially, Tsarist authorities permitted local supervision of the “native part” of cities such as Tashkent. But following unexpected riots, this policy was altered – not to enhance the welfare of the city, but to better monitor the political sentiment of residents. Consequently, the police functions were taken away from the *oqsoqol* and transferred to the Russian police chief (*politseimeister*), who with Russian assistants superintended a police body that was still comprised mostly of natives for both the European and native quarters<sup>97</sup>. This centralization illustrates the Tsarist regime’s shift from symbolic tolerance to more direct forms of control, embedding colonial authority deeper into local administrative structures. According to Abramson, this change resulted in a

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<sup>93</sup> Akmal Bazarbaev, “The Turkestan Statute and the Reorganization of Administrative Divisions in Central Asia, 1886-1917: A Case Study of Jizzakh District,” *Oriente Moderno* 102, no. 2 (January 19, 2023): 281–300, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-12340287>, 281.

<sup>94</sup> Vasily Vladimirovich Bartol'd, *Istoriia kul'turnoi zhizni Turkestana* (Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1927), 192.

<sup>95</sup> Noori, “Delegating Coercion”, 58.

<sup>96</sup> Bartol'd, *Istoriia kul'turnoi zhizni*, 191.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

reduction in local autonomy within the mahalla, leading to a further integration into the municipal government<sup>98</sup>. He contends that this shift laid the foundation for the mahalla's eventual integration as administrative units within the political framework during the Soviet era.

However, even with all these changes, Russian rule was never able to fully penetrate into the micro-level of everyday life, which would've encroached it more. This illustrates the absence of capillary power – despite efforts to assert sovereign control, Tsarist governance lacked the institutional depth and normative legitimacy to embed itself in everyday practices. An instance of this is the physical segregation of societies, where “European quarters” were established separately from old “native quarters”, resulting in two distinct and segregated societies. These groups rarely interacted, further reinforcing the spatial and cultural distance between settlers and local residents. Infrastructure development was concentrated in European quarters, while native quarters often lacked basic services – with some reportedly without a single lantern for street lightning<sup>99</sup>. Sanitation and urban planning remained vastly unequal, with infrastructure improvement being reserved to European quarters, underscoring the limits of colonial authority in everyday life<sup>100</sup>.

This early stage of partial integration of the mahalla into state governance would be radically restructured under Soviet rule, which not only formalized the institution but transformed it into a key instrument of ideological and administrative control. Unlike today's Uzbek state, which legitimizes its authority by appropriating and elevating traditional structures, Tsarist governance attempted to overwrite local authority—renaming roles, reconfiguring institutions, and imposing external norms without grounding them in existing social legitimacy. This top-down approach limited its effectiveness, as it failed to embed state power into the micro-level of daily life. The contrast highlights a core argument of this chapter: the mahalla only became a truly effective tool of state governance when it was not only formalized, but also symbolically integrated into the national narrative.

## 2.2.Soviet Co-optation and Formalization

The collapse of the Russian Empire and the subsequent Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 were seen as a moment of great opportunity for revolutionaries in Central Asia. As Russia

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<sup>98</sup> David MacKenzie Abramson, “From Soviet to Mahalla: Community and Transition in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan” (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 1998), 68–69.

<sup>99</sup> Bartol'd, *Istoriia kul'turnoi zhizni*, 173.

<sup>100</sup> Abramson, *From Soviet to Mahalla*, 67.

withdrew from World War I and the Ottoman Empire's advanced into the Caucasus, a brief window of autonomy opened for local actors. In this context, the Kokand Autonomous Government was declared in November 1917, with the aim to establish an independent Turkestan<sup>101</sup>. However, this experiment was short-lived. Within three months, it was crushed by Bolshevik forces and replaced by the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. This marked the beginning of a prolonged and systematic Soviet effort to integrate Central Asia into its broader socialist project.

Soviet administrators quickly identified the need for a transformative agenda that extended beyond financial investment or state violence. Lacking the necessary resources for broadscale modernization, administrators relied on a hybrid strategy: using violence where necessary, but more often engaging in pragmatic adaptation of local customs and institutions<sup>102</sup>. In this process, the mahalla was not eradicated, but strategically reconfigured to serve the society-building project.

Hirsch describes this approach as “state-sponsored evolutionism”, where top-down societal changes were framed as necessary for rapid modernization and integration of the Empire's extensive territories into the Soviet economic and administrative framework<sup>103</sup>. Rather than dismantling the mahalla, Soviet administrators preserved and appropriated the structure, while stripping it of independent authority, and reshaping it to function within the ideological logic of the state. While Mosques and other traditional institutions were shuttered, and campaigns like the *hujum* targeted traditional practices such as veiling, the mahalla survived. Not because it was a respected tradition, but because it proved administratively useful – manageable, malleable, and easily embedded within Soviet oversight mechanisms.

In 1922, the Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the Turkestan Autonomous SSR issued a memorandum recommending the immediate formal establishment of Mahalla Commissions in each mahalla in “native cities” in the Republic<sup>104</sup>. To operationalize this directive, the boundaries of mahallas were surveyed, demarcated, and formally documented. Similar neighborhood commissions (*kvartal*) already existed in the “European

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<sup>101</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 57.

<sup>102</sup> Sievers, “Uzbekistan's Mahalla,” 112.

<sup>103</sup> Francine Hirsch, “Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities,” *The Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (April 2000): 201–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0036-0341.00117>. 203

<sup>104</sup> Abramson, *From Soviet to Mahalla*, 72.

quarters”. Ten years later, in 1932, this recommendation became law throughout the Republic<sup>105</sup>. Public buildings were constructed in the center of certain selected mahallas to house these newly established Mahalla Commissions, gradually transforming the mahalla into a legally recognized administrative unit<sup>106</sup>.

Another structural change involved the redefinition and the formalization of leadership. The traditional *oqsoqol* became a symbolically elected figure, whose appointment and legitimacy were now controlled by the local party apparatus<sup>107</sup>. Historically, these individuals were chosen by the residents, based on personal aspects such as reputation and merit. This reflected a broader Soviet strategy of neutralizing traditional authority while preserving their institutional continuity for administrative convenience.

Soviet authorities also recognized the strategic potential of other traditional social spaces – such as the *gap* (unofficial, private social gathering), *choykhona* (teahouse) and the bazaar – as useful platforms for political indoctrination among the native population. These “gap” were unofficial associations among a small group of residents that would visit each other’s homes and engage over talks over dinner, with one organizer<sup>108</sup>. In 1924, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkestan instructed “responsible workers” to attend *gaps* in mahallas and steer discussions toward party doctrine<sup>109</sup>. These communal spaces became instruments for soft indoctrination, sites of managed interaction between state ideology and everyday life. The reach of the state went deeper still, with the mahalla being used to control residents. Mahalla’s were used to monitor whether households paid taxes on crops and livestock and were watched for anti-Soviet behavior<sup>110</sup>. Furthermore, the attempts to intrude into the private life, for example with the suggestions of preferable baby names that were “appropriate” for socialist lifestyles<sup>111</sup>. This intervention is a typical reflection of biopolitical power strategies, mechanisms aimed at regulating the intimate details of life.

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<sup>105</sup> Abramson, *From Soviet to Mahalla*, 67.

<sup>106</sup> Noori, “Delegating Coercion”, 62.

<sup>107</sup> Sievers, “Uzbekistan’s Mahalla,” 113.

<sup>108</sup> Timur Dadabaev, “Community Life, Memory and a Changing Nature of Mahalla Identity in Uzbekistan,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4, no. 2 (July 2013): 181–96, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2013.03.008>, 184.

<sup>109</sup> Abramson, *From Soviet to Mahalla*, 71.

<sup>110</sup> Dadabaev, “Community Life, Memory,” 186.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott argues that this transformation of non-state spaces into state-spaces is justified in the name of progress and access to previously inaccessible public goods, but that these interventions almost always either disrupt or destroy previous communities<sup>112</sup>. Despite the state's increasing control over the allocation of essential public goods and services such as electricity, water, and employment, mahallas retained functions that the state could not fully absorb. Mahallas remained relevant in coordinating social life, mediating disputes, and offering informal assistance to residents. In this sense, the mahalla became a hybrid institution: partly reengineered, partly residual, bridging state ideology and communal expectations. It also emerged as a quiet space of cultural resistance. Mahallas helped preserve Uzbek language, Islamic rituals, and customary norms – therefore becoming a space to avoid russification<sup>113</sup>. By creating these spaces, the mahalla preserved alternative norms and identities opposed to official Soviet discourse. From a Foucauldian perspective, this constitutes a form of resistance.

The Soviet vision of modernization also encompassed urban restructuring. In contrast to previous Tsarist-era segregation of “native” and “European” quarters, Soviet planners sought spatial integration by tearing down traditional mahalla layouts and replacing them with Soviet-style apartment blocks, mixing both parts of society together. This merging altered the character of the mahalla itself. What had once been a compact, enclosed neighborhood structure now became more diffuse and impersonal, with significantly more residents and weaker social cohesion. As a result, the traditional mechanisms of mutual aid and informal oversight eroded. Though the mahalla survived in name, its communal essence diminished. Increasingly, residents began turning to the state, rather than to neighbors or elders, for support and services. This spatial and social transformation marked the mahalla's transformation from a mutual support network into a bureaucratic outpost – exemplifying the state's partial success at disciplinary reconfiguration.

According to Noori, the formalization of the mahalla during the Soviet period laid the bureaucratic foundation for its post-independence revival. The 1932 legislation already mandated for the newly established Mahalla Committees to register marriages and deaths, encourage education, support women's emancipation, and collect taxes – roles strikingly

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<sup>112</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 191.

<sup>113</sup> Sievers, “Uzbekistan's Mahalla,” 145.

similar to those they perform nowadays<sup>114</sup>. Abramson documented four decrees before independence, from the years 1932, 1941, 1953, and 1983. Although they remained inaccessible due to archival restrictions, their very existence underscores the continuity in bureaucratic function. By the time of Uzbekistan's independence, the mahalla had evolved into a semi-formal institution, blending local governance, social control, and welfare provisions – all within the framework of Soviet state power.

During Khrushchev's era, the idea of the decentralization of the state power and functions to community structures was associated as being a primary mission of the next stage of communist development<sup>115</sup>. The 1961 Party Program introduced the notion of "citizen self-government", aiming to transfer some state functions to "volunteer organizations", like the mahalla<sup>116</sup>. During the Brezhnev era, this delegation of state power to local soviets and community structures continued, also as a means of increasing the peoples control over local elites<sup>117</sup>. Interestingly, this trend would continue after independence, with many welfare mechanisms being transferred to the mahalla.

However, as during the times of the Tsarist Empire, the mahalla's role under Soviet rule was marked not by complete state engineering, but by ambiguous co-optation due to a lack of absolute state control over the institution. Through partial institutionalization and manipulation of tradition, Soviet power attempted to normalize everyday life not by erasing the mahalla but by bending it to function as a low-cost node of surveillance and ideological diffusion.

Despite its efforts, the Soviet regime failed to transform the mahalla into a fully internalized tool of ideological governance. The Soviet project was constrained by its inability to culturally legitimize the mahalla as a Soviet institution. Lacking a compelling narrative of tradition or authenticity, the state's interventions remained largely external and bureaucratic. The attempt to govern through of surveillance and normalization fell short when divorced from cultural legitimacy. As Allworth stated, "the twelve decades of Russian

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<sup>114</sup> Neema Noori, "Expanding State Authority, Cutting Back Local Services: Decentralization and Its Contradictions in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 4 (December 2006): 533–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930701210526>, 537.

<sup>115</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Milestones: 1953–1960: The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/khrushchev-20th-congress>.

<sup>116</sup> Liudmila Lapteva, "Problems of Local Self-Government in Russia," *Russian Review* Vol. 55, no. 2 (April 1996): 317–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/131844>, 318.

<sup>117</sup> Noori, "Expanding State Authority, Cutting Back Local Services," 536.

rule may have altered the ways people in the region work, behave and think, but not the basic values and beliefs that pervade the society and create its attitudes.”<sup>118</sup> Thus, the mahallas persisted while also being slowly reformatted by the state – a key reason why post-independence regimes could easily re-invoke them. As we will see in the final section of the analysis, it is precisely the rhetoric of “authentic” tradition, not just legal codification, that enabled the mahalla to be fully normalized as a governance tactic in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

### 3. The Mahalla’s successful integration into state power

The contemporary mahalla, unlike the precedent’s, has been successfully integrated. It exemplifies how authoritarian states can normalize control by embedding governance in cultural tradition and social routine. Through symbolic appropriation, institutional expansion, and legislative formalization, the state transformed the mahalla into a node of capillary power – operating not through overt repression but through routine, surveillance, and moral authority. In this way, the mahalla is no longer outside the state; it is the state, dispersed into everyday life.

The contemporary mahalla, unlike its historical antecedents, has been successfully integrated into the state apparatus. It exemplifies how authoritarian regimes can normalize control by embedding governance within cultural tradition and daily routine. Through symbolic appropriation, legislative formalization, and institutional expansion, the state transformed the mahalla into a capillary node of power – exercising control not through visible repression but through routine, surveillance, and moral authority. The mahalla is no longer outside the state; it is the state, dispersed into the microstructures of everyday life.

#### 3.1. Symbolic Appropriation of the Mahalla in Nation-Building

The first foundational strength of the contemporary mahalla lies in its symbolic redefinition and elevation as a national symbol of Uzbek identity. On the September 1st, 1991, following the coup in Moscow and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Uzbekistan was granted full sovereignty as a nation-state. This unexpected

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<sup>118</sup> Edward Allworth, *Central Asia, 130 Years of Russian Dominance* (Duke University Press, 1994), 572.

independence came without a prior nationalist movement or unifying struggle, making the task of constructing a cohesive national identity particularly complex<sup>119</sup>.

In response, the first President of Uzbekistan and his regime, Islam Karimov, sought to fill the ideological vacuum left by the downfall of communism by crafting a national historical metanarrative. Laruelle argues that the state replaced the communist-era rhetoric of class struggle by a discourse of national revival, which viewed the new state as the natural culmination of the Uzbek nation's century-old drive for independence<sup>120</sup>. Independent Uzbekistan encouraged the construction of a historical narrative that insists on the nation's ancient history and its continuity, despite being subjugated by foreign regimes. Central to this effort was the promotion of traditional institutions like the mahalla, reimagined as a timeless and foundational element of Uzbek society.

In line with Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist theory, where nations are modern constructs that rely on reinterpreted historical symbols and practices to build legitimacy – the Karimov regime reimagined the mahalla as a timeless and essential feature of Uzbek society<sup>121</sup>. It was not merely framed as a surviving relic of the past, but as an authentic expression of national character, moral order, and cultural continuity. As Abramson noted, “a larger movement to reinvigorate the *mahalla* as a tradition and as a political symbol emerged shortly after independence, as an ideological strategy, in order for the leadership of a new nation-state to acquire legitimacy based on national heritage.”<sup>122</sup>

This symbolic investment is evident in official policy. In autumn of 1992, the newspaper *Pravda Vostoka* published the presidential decree about the creation of the “Mahalla-Fund”, with President Karimov himself as its chairman<sup>123</sup>. This demonstrates the public enthusiasm for the reinvigoration of a supposedly traditional institution. Furthermore, the language of the decree was steeped with ideological language, aiming to “ensure state support for measures to preserve the broad propaganda of historically established national

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<sup>119</sup> Nazif Shahrani, “Central Asia and the Challenge of the Soviet Legacy,” *Central Asian Survey* 12, no. 2 (January 1993): 123–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939308400809>, 131.

<sup>120</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Nation Narrated: Uzbekistan's Political and Cultural Nationalism,” in *Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of the Post-Soviet Years*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), “The Nation Narrated: Uzbekistan's Political and Cultural Nationalism,” in [Marlene Laruelle, ed., Constructing the Uzbek State. Narratives of the Post-Soviet Years. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018, 261-282.](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939308400809), 262.

<sup>121</sup> Laruelle, “The Nation Narrated,” 261.

<sup>122</sup> Abramson, *From Soviet to Mahalla*, 13.

<sup>123</sup> “Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan – O Sozdanii Respublikanskogo Blagotvoritel'nogo Fonda ‘Makhalla,’” *Pravda Vostoka*, no. 135 (22856), September 15, 1992, <https://press.natlib.uz/ru/editions/31154>.

and spiritual values, popularize the best folk customs and traditions, expand cultural and educational work among the mahallas of the republic.”<sup>124</sup> Hobsbawm refers to this as the “invention of tradition,” whereby the state mobilizes and selectively reinterprets cultural symbols to create a feeling of timeless national identity. The state incorporated its power into daily life by converting the mahalla into a location for cultural instruction and the spread of ideologies, utilizing symbolic heritage as a means of governance and nation-building.

The ideological promotion of the mahalla continued with another presidential decree issued in October 1992, titled “On the Allocation of Funds to the Republican Charitable Mahalla Foundation.” Article 3 of this decree instructed editorial offices of newspapers, magazines, and national television and radio outlets should create dedicated sections promoting the activities of the Mahalla Foundation<sup>125</sup>. This directive made clear that the state viewed media coverage as an essential tool for promoting the mahalla into the national consciousness.

The symbolic elevation reached a new height in 2003 when the Cabinet of Ministers declared it “The Year of the Mahalla.” This initiative was framed as a step towards further strengthening the mahalla’s role as a pillar of civil society. According to official narratives this campaign aimed to generate employment, increase support for impoverished families, and improve access to healthcare and recreational infrastructure<sup>126</sup>.

State media also continued to welcome this rhetoric, celebrating the mahalla as a traditional institution that represents “the stronghold of calm” – a phrase that captured both its idealized role in preserving social harmony and its place in the regime’s vision of national identity<sup>127</sup>. While the state’s symbolic embrace of the mahalla painted it as a bastion of tradition and social harmony, its actual function increasingly aligned with mechanisms of surveillance and discipline. In reaction to the declaration of the resolution proclaiming 2003 as “The Year of the Mahalla” a local journalist critically observed: “In the past, there was one district inspector, militiaman, for two to three mahallas. Nowadays two to three inspectors are not enough for one mahalla. If there are 100 inhabitants in one mahalla, 30

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<sup>124</sup> Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan, “O Sozdanii Respublikanskogo Blagotvoritel’nogo Fonda ‘Makhalla,’” no. 472, September 12, 1992. <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/169554>

<sup>125</sup> Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan, “O Vydelanii Sredstv Respublikanskomu Blagotvoritel’nomu Fondu ‘Makhalla,’” no. 478, October 8, 1992. <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/170825>

<sup>126</sup> Lyudmila Gorbunova, “2003 god ob”yavlen v nashey strane Godom makhalli,” *Narodnoe slovo*, no. 253(3075), 2016. <https://press.natlib.uz/ru/editions/55>.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

of them are "pospons" [in charge of security], 20 of them are "quloqs" [who collaborate with security officials]. It's very difficult for an individual to break that net [and be independent.]"<sup>128</sup>. This illustrates the saturation of everyday life with informal agents of state surveillance. This marks a deepening of capillary power – with power being exercised not only through bureaucratic structure, but through the spread of agents of surveillance within the community.

This tradition-building strategy did not stop with Karimov. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the symbolic elevation of the mahalla continued with renewed vigor.

The mahalla became increasingly entangled with disciplinary power, but solely through surveillance, but also through positive sanctions of normative behavior. Previously, mahallas would organize an exhibition to celebrate their achievements and honor exemplary citizens – events that served as mechanisms of behavioral control by publicly rewarding those who embodied state-approved norms<sup>129</sup>. These performances enacted Foucauldian discipline not through coercion, but through communal recognition, producing self-regulating subjects attuned to moral exemplarity. This disciplinary function was later institutionalized through state rituals. In 2020, a new national holiday, the “Day of Workers of the Mahalla System” to underline the important role of the mahalla “in the social and spiritual life of society”<sup>130</sup>. This initiative reflects the state’s ongoing rhetorical strategy of inventing new traditions to legitimize and naturalize the mahalla’s role. The symbolic alignment of this day with the Navruz celebrations in 2021 further linked the mahalla with national revival. The following year, the President himself stated, “It is symbolic that this holiday, celebrated for the first time in our country, takes place precisely on the days of Navruz – the time of renewal and good deeds.”<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, a “Mahalla’s Pride” badge (*Makhalla Iftikhori*) was established to encourage the activists of self-government bodies, with official rhetoric insisting that the mahalla “has always been and remains for our people a school of life, friendship, and good neighborliness.”<sup>132</sup> Invented traditions, such as mentioned, are not neutral symbols. Not only are they invented traditions aimed at

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<sup>128</sup> Charles Carlson, “Uzbekistan: The Changing Role of the ‘Mahalla,’” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (RFE/RL, February 24, 2003), <https://www.rferl.org/a/1102323.html>.

<sup>129</sup> Koroteyeva and Makarova, “The Assertion of Uzbek National Identity,” 142.

<sup>130</sup> “22 March Declared as the Day of Workers of the Mahalla System,” UZ DAILY, February 19, 2020, <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/22-march-declared-as-the-day-of-workers-of-the-mahalla-system/>.

<sup>131</sup> Shavkat Mirziyoyev, “The Ministry for Support of Mahalla and Family Has Been Established,” *President of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, March 22, 2021. <https://www.president.uz/en/lists/view/4250>.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

legitimizing both the mahalla and the state, but they can also be interpreted as disciplinary mechanisms, shaping how people understand their roles and potentially their behaviors.

The President further highlighted the importance of the mahalla in regard to regime stability, insisting that as tensions grow all over the world, the mahalla continues to propagate an atmosphere of mutual understanding and harmony<sup>133</sup>. This rhetorical inflation of the mahalla's significance reflects its transformation into both a cultural anchor and a regime-stabilizing mechanism.

These symbolic gestures and their institutionalization do not merely glorify tradition and history – they function as techniques of governmentality, subtly guiding citizens to align with state-defined norms of morality, order, and belonging. The mahalla is therefore an institution that operates as a site of subjectification, producing the ideal national subject through both ritualized celebration and everyday practices.

In conclusion, the symbolic appropriation of the mahalla has elevated it far beyond its Tsarist or Soviet functions. No longer only a community structure or a simple instrument of administrative oversight, the contemporary mahalla has become a central part of the state's legitimization process. Through the invention of traditions and commemorative rituals, the regime has transformed the mahalla into a site of moral authority. In Foucauldian terms, it exemplifies the shift from coercive to productive power, governing not merely through laws and repression, but by shaping subjects' conduct and values. These symbolic investments grant the mahalla a depth of legitimacy and embeddedness that other regimes never achieved, making it a potent hybrid of tradition and technology in Uzbekistan's project of modern authoritarian governance.

### 3.2. Institutionalization and Expansion of the Mahalla as a State Apparatus

The second foundational strength of the contemporary mahalla lies in its continuous institutionalization and expansion as a formalized extension of state power. Following independence, the mahalla was integrated into the new public administration system as a sub-unit of the local government (*hokimiyat*). This shift marked a significant transformation: what began as a symbolic revival of tradition soon evolved into a pragmatic reengineering of the mahalla into a standardized governance apparatus. Drawing on Soviet, Karimov's government transformed the mahalla into a standardized unit of governance.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Under Karimov, the mahalla gradually evolved into a core component of the state's administrative and security infrastructure. This transformation involved not only an increase in the number of mahallas across Uzbekistan but also a deepening of their bureaucratic functions. As previously mentioned, at the time of the Tsarist conquest Tashkent comprised 149 mahallas across its four districts. By the year 1989, that number had risen to 278 officially registered mahallas in Tashkent, a number that rose slowly to 299 a year later. However, by the spring of 1993, their number had surged to at least 422 – with new mahallas reportedly being established “almost every day.”<sup>134</sup> This exponential growth illustrates what Foucault described as the pervasive capillary nature of power. Through the expansion and bureaucratization of the mahalla, the state embedded itself into the most intimate levels of social life: within families, neighborhoods, and personal relationships. This institutional reconfiguration was formalized through a series of legislative acts. A 2014 resolution by the Cabinet of Ministers (Resolution no. 48) further formalized state control over the mahalla's spatial structure by placing the authority to create, merge, or dissolve mahallas in the hands of regional and national councils, rather than local communities themselves<sup>135</sup>. The regulation also standardized mahalla size, requiring most to comprise at least four hundred households – thereby imposing uniformity across diverse geographic and social contexts<sup>136</sup>.

In September 1992, a Presidential Decree established the Mahalla Fund, naming Karimov as chairperson. This newly created state body, structured hierarchically with branches at every level of administration – was intended to promote “the ‘mahallization’ of the Republic of Uzbekistan” – meaning the introduction of the mahalla in untraditional settings such as high-rise buildings where mainly non-Uzbeks lived<sup>137</sup>. This spread of the mahalla and its activities to citizens that were historically not involved in the mahalla reflects the state's desire to integrate the entire population into this system of localized governance.

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<sup>134</sup> Koroteyeva and Makarova, “The Assertion of Uzbek National Identity,” 140.

<sup>135</sup> O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Vazirlar Mahkamasi, “Shaharlar, shaharchalar, qishloqlar va ovullarning mahallalarini tuzish, birlashtirish, bo‘lish va tugatish, ularning chegaralarini belgilash va o‘zgartirish, ularga nom berish va nomlarini o‘zgartirish tartibi to‘g‘risidagi nizomni tasdiqlash haqida,” qaror no. 48, March 4, 2014, art. 10, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/2349371>.

(The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “On the Approval of the Regulation on the Procedure for the Formation, Merger, Division, and Abolition of Mahallas in Cities, Towns, Villages, and Settlements, and the Determination and Modification of Their Boundaries and Names.”)

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, art. 8.

<sup>137</sup> Koroteyeva and Makarova, “The Assertion of Uzbek National Identity,” 139.

Despite official narratives emphasizing tradition, the structure and function of the contemporary mahalla mirror Soviet-era precedents. For instance, the head of a mahalla operates with the support of a Mahalla Committee – a configuration directly inherited from the Soviet era<sup>138</sup>. This continuity is underscored by the composition of today's Mahalla Committees members: the *oqsoqol* (chairman), a secretary, a pedagogue (instructor) and a *posbon* (guardian). While these roles are couched in traditional language, they function as repurposed bureaucratic positions designed to enhance the perceived cultural legitimacy of what are essentially administrative agents of the state<sup>139</sup>. This continuity with Soviet administrative practice reveals how the state appropriated traditional vocabulary to legitimize what could be described as mechanisms of centralized control.

The institutionalization of the mahalla system was significantly advanced with the adoption of the 1999 Law “On Citizens’ Self-Government Bodies”<sup>140</sup>. The early independence period is reflected in the legal texts on the mahalla, which were more symbolic in acknowledging the mahalla’s cultural and traditional roles. In contrast, the 1999 law marked a turning point in the formalization and bureaucratization of the mahalla, transforming it from a loosely defined self-governing community into a formalized administrative institution. According to Articles 11 and 13 of the legislation, mahallas are charged with assisting local governments in implementing a broad range of tasks and policies<sup>141</sup>.

Only a few days after the adoption of the Mahalla Law, the Cabinet of Ministers passed the *Posbon Law*, establishing the position of “neighborhood guardian” (*posbon*) under the Mahalla Committee’s authority and in close cooperation with local police<sup>142</sup>. This legislation marks the beginning of the institutionalization of surveillance at the community level under the guise of social support and reintegration. While officially framed as measure

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Noori, “Expanding State Authority, Cutting Back Local Services,” 536.

<sup>140</sup> Subsequently referred to as “Mahalla Law”

<sup>141</sup> O‘zbekiston Respublikasining Qonuni , 14.04.1999 no. 758, “Fuqarolarning o‘zini o‘zi boshqarish organlari to‘g‘risida,” <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/86238>.

(*Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 14.04.1999 no. 758, “On the self-governing bodies of citizens,”*)

<sup>142</sup> O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Vazirlar Mahkamasining qarori, 19.04.1999 no. 180, “Jazoni o‘tash joylaridan ozod qilingan shaxslarga ijtimoiy-maishiy jihatdan va ishga joylashishda yordam ko‘rsatish bo‘yicha Qoraqalpog‘iston Respublikasi Vazirlar Kengashi va hokimliklar huzuridagi maxsus komissiyalar, “Mahalla posboni” jamoat tuzilmalari va fuqarolarning o‘zini o‘zi boshqarish organlari huzuridagi yarashtirish komissiyalari to‘g‘risidagi nizomlarni tasdiqlash haqida,” <https://lex.uz/docs/-622966>  
(*Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, No. 180 of 19.04.1999, On approval of the regulations on the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan and special commissions under the governorates, public structures of the “neighborhood posboni” and conciliation commissions under the self-governing bodies of citizens in order to provide assistance to persons freed from their places of punishment in socio-domestic terms and employment*)

to assist the reintegration of former prisoners into society, the posbon rapidly became a key figure in the state's surveillance and preventive policing strategy. As documented by Human Rights Watch, posbons are expected to regularly report to the police on individuals without residence permits, those absent from their homes for extended periods, or those not living in their houses – information's that are systematically logged and shared with law enforcement<sup>143</sup>. This further supports the argument of capillary power, with the state diffusing its control through local actors such as the posbon, embedding state control into spaces of everyday life.

The declaration of 2003 as the “Year of the Well-Being Mahalla” was accompanied by a Cabinet of Ministers resolution aimed at “further strengthening the role and status of the mahalla in state and public administration, in the socio-political and economic life of society,” as well as to “improve the current regulatory and legal framework of the mahalla's activities, expand its powers and increase its responsibility”<sup>144</sup>. This marked the clear intention of the state to expand upon the mahalla both symbolically and legally. The resolution represents a moment of full institutional embrace of the mahalla as a mechanism of governance, reinforcing its role as an extension of state authority under the guise of cultural tradition.

Upon assuming power in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev did not dismantle this system, but rather intensified and expanded it. Institutionalization continued with marked momentum. In just one year following Karimov's death, five new legal texts concerning the mahalla were passed. This number grew rapidly: six in 2018, ten in 2020, fifteen in 2021, and twenty in 2022. This legislative boom illustrates the regime's commitment to making the mahalla a crucial point of its governance structure.

In February 2020, a new state body, the Ministry for Support of the Mahalla and Family, was created. According to Urinboyev and Eraliev, experts within the government perceived this as a logical step in further developing the mahalla system, indicating the need for a separate state agency which can regulate, systematize, and strengthen all laws, policies, and

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<sup>143</sup> Bogner, “From House to House,” 9.

<sup>144</sup> O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Vazirlar Mahkamasining qarori, 07.02.2003 no. 70, ““Obod Mahalla Yili” Dasturi To‘g‘risida,” <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/-243231> (Decision of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 07.02.2003 no. 70, “On The “Prosperous Neighborhood Year” Program,”)

social relations related to the mahallas<sup>145</sup>. The legislative text also extended the term of the mahalla chairperson from three to five years.

In a speech 2021, President Mirziyoyev underlined that over the last four years the mahalla has been considered the primary link in the state structure, with large-scale reforms aimed at enhancing its role and adopting more than 50 legislative acts on the development of the sphere were adopted and a new system was introduced in each region based on the “Prosperous and Safe Mahalla” Principle<sup>146</sup>. The high amount of legislative formalization of the mahalla underlines its increasing absorption into the state structure.

In 2023, in order to further strengthen the mahalla system a “system of five” was created, consisting of the chairman of the mahalla, an assistant to the hokim, a women’s activist, a youth leader, and a prevention inspector. This was increased to the “mahalla seven” with the addition of a tax officer and a social worker, in order to further oversee the activities of mahalla workers, especially concerning the allocation of funds for social support<sup>147</sup>. This demonstrates not only the incremental enhancement of administrative coordination, but also exemplifies a broader disciplining of society through localized oversight.

In sum, the evolution of the mahalla into an almost fully institutionalized arm of the state reflects a broader strategy of governance through embedded locality. From its bureaucratic expansion under Karimov to its legislative acceleration under Mirziyoyev, the mahalla has become a normalized and essential extension of state power that now operates at the intersection of administration, surveillance, and social discipline. Indeed, the mahalla exemplifies how modern states exercise disciplinary power not through centralized coercion, but through localized, routinized mechanisms of control that shape behavior and manage populations. The institutionalization of the mahalla thus marks a shift from symbolic tradition to structured governmentality.

#### 4. Conclusion

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<sup>145</sup> Rustamjon Urinboyev and Sherzod Eraliev, “Informal Civil Society Initiatives in Non-Western Societies: Mahallas in Uzbekistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 3 (April 21, 2022): 477–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2058915>, 487.

<sup>146</sup> “To the Workers and Activists of the Mahalla System of Uzbekistan,” President.uz, 2021, <https://www.president.uz/en/lists/view/4250>.

<sup>147</sup> Kozimkhon Khujaev, “Issues of Further Strengthening the Mahalla System Discussed,” Embassy of Uzbekistan in the United States, September 26, 2023, <https://uzbekistan.org/issues-of-further-strengthening-the-mahalla-system-discussed/3919/>.

In conclusion, the state's governance strategy of combining administrative functionality with cultural legitimacy is what has transformed the mahalla into a key component of post-independence governance. While under Tsarist and Soviet rule the mahalla remained a semi-autonomous or marginal institution, post-independence Uzbekistan slowly reengineered it into a formal, standardized branch of state power. This was achieved through a dual strategy: the symbolic elevation of the mahalla as an eternal expression of Uzbek tradition, and its institutionalization through dense legislation and administrative expansion. Drawing on Foucault's theory, the mahalla exemplifies how capillary power penetrates daily life not through coercion but through normalization, routine, and moral authority. This chapter has traced how, across three regimes, the structure and function of the mahalla evolved from informal local self-governance to a deeply embedded mechanism of state control. It is this convergence of cultural symbolism and institutional depth that explains why the mahalla has become such a potent and resilient instrument of authoritarian governance in Uzbekistan today.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS OF THE MAHALLA THROUGH FOUCAULT'S LENS

### 1. Introduction

Uzbekistan is widely classified as a fragile state, a categorization underscored by its position on the Fragile States Index (FSI), which was developed for assessing the vulnerability of states to collapse. With a 2024 FSI score of 64.8 out of 120, ranking it 96th out of 179 countries, Uzbekistan is categorized as a state under stress. However, the trajectory of its scores reveals a noteworthy trend: over the past five years, Uzbekistan's fragility score has improved by 10.9 points, and by 21.5 points over the last decade. These negative values reflect a decrease in fragility, suggesting that the state has become more stable and resilient in certain key areas. However, a closer look at the sub-indicators reveals an interesting contradiction. While the State Legitimacy Indicator has shown consistent and even sharp improvement since 2011, the Human Rights Indicator has been in steady decline – particularly since 2016. The State Legitimacy Indicator measures factors such as government representativeness, openness, and the ability of the state to maintain public confidence and exercise core functions<sup>148</sup>. Conversely, the Human Rights Indicator tracks the state's respect for legal norms, due process, freedom of expression, and protections against authoritarian abuses. The divergence between these two trajectories – rising legitimacy versus declining rights – epitomizes the paradox at the heart of Uzbekistan's political system<sup>149</sup>.

This paradox reflects a deeper structural logic. Uzbekistan has developed a governance model in which legitimacy is not derived from liberal democratic norms, but in the strategic deployment of social institutions – above all the mahalla. The mahalla has become central to the regime's project of stability and state-building. In the early post-independence period of the 1990s, it functioned primarily as a welfare organ, distributing food, aid, and targeted subsidies at a time of widespread economic uncertainty. However, by the 2000s, and especially after the 1999 Tashkent bombings, the mahalla's remit expanded to include the

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<sup>148</sup> “P1: State Legitimacy | Fragile States Index,” [fragilestatesindex.org](https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/p1/), n.d., <https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/p1/>.

<sup>149</sup> “P3: Human Rights and Rule of Law | Fragile States Index,” [fragilestatesindex.org](https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/p3/), n.d., <https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/p3/>.

identification and suppression of unauthorized religious activity, reflecting the securitization of everyday life.

Thus, this chapter explores the question, *how does the mahalla contribute to the stability of the state, particularly in the light of its classification as a fragile state?* While ultimately arguing that the mahalla helps maintain internal stability through the rhetoric of state securitization, which employs tripartite power in order to restrict what the state considers as dangerous expressions of religiosity.

## 2. Securitizing Islam: The Mahalla as a Tool of Religious Governance

As previously mentioned, security, in the modern state, is no longer merely a response to external threats – it has become a governing rationality that reshapes the life of citizens. In this shift, the state no longer secures itself from the outside, but instead governs from within, producing and managing threats through surveillance and pre-emptive action.

Since independence, the state has strategically deployed the mahalla as a tool of securitization, using it to manage interethnic tensions, declining living standards, and social discontent<sup>150</sup>. To achieve this objective, the government re-organized the mahallas, institutionalizing them, and delegating previous state prerogatives to them. After the turbulent few years of independence, this discourse on securitization has shifted, especially after the emergence of non-traditional threats such as terrorism and radicalization.

I argue that the mahalla can be understood as a “security dispositive,” as it unites a complex assemblage of practices and discourses that manage the population and ensures the securitization of the state. Ultimately, the securitization of religion in Uzbekistan reflects Foucault’s triangle of power in full operation. Sovereign power punishes visible transgression, disciplinary power shapes conduct, while biopower regulates populations by classifying risk and managing life through pre-emptive surveillance and statistical control. Together, they enable a regime of control that masks repression as responsibility and surveillance as social harmony – ensuring that the mahalla becomes the capillary extension of state power into the intimate lives of believers.

Indeed, as Burnashev described, the state used the terminology of security in order to access all spheres of daily existence of its citizens – even the most intimate spheres, such as the freedom of thought. The use of the rhetoric of the need to secure the state and its continuity

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<sup>150</sup> Dadabaev, “Community Life, Memory,” 191.

has been used in order to justify repression of independent Muslim groups has been exploited by the Uzbek government since the late 1990s. The renewed attacks by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in August 2000 ensured that the government of Uzbekistan had a continued rhetorical opportunity to justify its repression of independent Muslim groups and political opponents on the grounds of the use of threat by armed Islamic extremists.

### 2.1. Sovereign Power: Repression and the Spectacle of Punishment

Sovereign power, characterized by the traditional right “to take life or let live,” remains operative in Uzbekistan’s governance of religion, despite the state’s modernization. Unlike disciplinary power, sovereign power is visible in its capacity for direct, symbolic intervention – mainly in the form of public punishment or execution.

In early 1999, a series of car bombings rocked the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, killing sixteen people and injuring more than a hundred. This unprecedented assault on government targets shook public confidence in the state’s stability for the first time since independence<sup>151</sup>. One year after the attacks, on the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, the government announced the executing of six of the twenty-two alleged participants, which were accused of being members of extremist religious organizations that planned to overthrow the government and assassinate the President and establishing an Islamic State<sup>152</sup>. Supposedly, after the Supreme Court confirmed the death sentences, President Karimov expressed his dissatisfaction with the verdict, stating that the defendants were “our children, and we have to treat them accordingly”, creating hope that he would replace the death sentence to long jail terms<sup>153</sup>. However, he did not grant clemency, and the executions were carried out. These highly publicized acts of punishment served to reaffirm the state’s monopoly on violence and its capacity to command obedience through spectacle. Their timing, coinciding with the holy month of Ramadan, rendered the message especially jarring for devout Muslims, underscoring the state’s readiness to override religious sensitivities in the name of security.

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<sup>151</sup> Abdumannob Polat and Nickolai Butkevich, “Unraveling the Mystery of the Tashkent Bombings : Theories and Implications,” *Demokratizatsiya* Vol. 8, no. 4 (Fall 2000) (2000): 541–53, [https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/08-4\\_PolatButkevich.PDF](https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/08-4_PolatButkevich.PDF), 541.

<sup>152</sup> “Uzbek Prosecutor Demands Death Penalty for 10 Accused of Bombing,” *CNN*, November 14, 2000, <https://edition.cnn.com/2000/ASIANOW/central/11/13/uzbekistan.penalty.reut/index.html>.

<sup>153</sup> RFE/RL, “Watch List: January 13, 2000,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (RFE/RL, January 13, 2000), <https://www.rferl.org/a/1347378.html>.

Sovereign power also manifests in the state's monopoly over religious legitimacy. Only state-approved Islamic authorities are permitted to operate, and unauthorized religious activity can result in imprisonment. This is not merely about law enforcement – it is about dramatizing the boundary between acceptable and deviant belief. In doing so, the state reaffirms its absolute authority over life, death, and belief. This regulatory power is formalized in Article 12 of the Mahalla Law, which mandates that Committees, “taking measures to stop the activity of non-registered religious organizations, to ensure observance of the rights of citizens for religious liberty, [and] to prevent the forced imposition of religious views.”<sup>154</sup> While seemingly promoting freedom of belief, the law refers back to the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations and related criminal and administrative codes that severely restrict religious practice that is not registered with the state. In addition to establishing registration criteria for religious organizations and certification requirements for religious leaders and teachers, the law also specifies a dress code for religious purposes. Additionally, the law forbids the “private teaching of religious principles.”<sup>155</sup> As a result, this law serves as a helpful tool for strategic social control.

These measures exemplify sovereign power not as a relic of the past, but as an enduring mechanism of control in certain cases. Through its selective use of spectacle, legal repression, and public punishment, the state asserts its ultimate authority over both the physical and spiritual domains of life. Sovereign power thus remains an integral pillar of Uzbekistan's governance, dramatizing the boundary between obedience and deviance to consolidate state legitimacy.

## 2.2. Disciplinary Power: Governance and the Machinery of Obedience

Disciplinary power, as theorized by Foucault, shapes the behavior of individuals not through direct punishment, but by normalizing state expectations through surveillance, regulation, and moral guidance. Unlike sovereign power, which operates through spectacular force or legal punishment, disciplinary power is subtle, continuous, and enacted through everyday practices of moral governance, surveillance, and normalization – all of which are enacted by the mahalla.

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<sup>154</sup> O'zbekiston Respublikasining Qonuni, 14.04.1999 no. 758, “Fuqarolarning o'zini o'zi boshqarish organlari to'g'risida,” Art. 12, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/86238>.

<sup>155</sup> Eric McGlinchey, “Divided Faith: Trapped between State and Islam in Uzbekistan,” in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, eds. Russell Zanca and Jeff Sahadeo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 310.

Mahalla Committee wield authority over a wide array of everyday activities. For instance, they are formally authorized to issue stamped permission notes (*spravkas*) required for various civil matters, such as initiating a divorce, gain admission to study, or undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca<sup>156</sup>. In addition, Mahalla Committees are also responsible for preparing the list of potential candidates eligible to perform the Hajj, which are then submitted to the local *hokimiyat*<sup>157</sup>. Although the final decision rests with the state-controlled Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, this process effectively makes the mahalla a gatekeeper of religious rights. Conformity to expected behavior often becomes a prerequisite for access to religious and civil freedoms.

President Islam Karimov reaffirmed the disciplinary role of the mahalla in his address to parliament. He emphasized the need to reinforce the role of the *posbon*, “To ensure public order in the localities the role of self-governing bodies, first of all, that of the mahalla must be increased. It is important to encourage the efforts by the mahalla committees to detect reasons and circumstances conducive to committing crimes and other offenses in the environment where people live and to eliminate these.”<sup>158</sup> This expansion of local surveillance extends deep into the domestic sphere. As Peshkovka notes, “Fear that subversive activities take place in domestic spaces bolsters the Uzbek government agents’ attempts to monitor and control such social events” – a fear that echoes concerns held by both the Russian Imperial and Soviet governments about what occurred behind closed doors<sup>159</sup>. In the post-independence era, the mahalla has become the ideal instrument to legitimate and institutionalize that intimate monitoring.

In conclusion, disciplinary power is perhaps the most pervasive form of state control exercised through the mahalla. By shaping conduct through surveillance, conditional access to rights, and moral regulation, Mahalla Committees function as disciplinary agents par excellence. They extend the reach of the state into homes, beliefs, and behaviors – transforming community life into a network of state-aligned norms.

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<sup>156</sup> Noori, “Expanding State Authority, Cutting Back Local Services,” 537.

<sup>157</sup> Bogner, “From House to House,” 9.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Svetlana Peshkovka, “Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan: Women, Religion, and Politics,” in *Constructing the Uzbek State. Narratives of the Post-Soviet Years*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018), 283–302, [https://www.academia.edu/35687103/The\\_Nation\\_Narrated\\_Uzbekistan\\_s\\_Political\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Nationalism\\_in\\_Marlene\\_Laruelle\\_ed\\_Constructing\\_the\\_Uzbek\\_State\\_Narratives\\_of\\_the\\_Post\\_Soviet\\_Years\\_Lanham\\_MD\\_Lexington\\_2018\\_261\\_282](https://www.academia.edu/35687103/The_Nation_Narrated_Uzbekistan_s_Political_and_Cultural_Nationalism_in_Marlene_Laruelle_ed_Constructing_the_Uzbek_State_Narratives_of_the_Post_Soviet_Years_Lanham_MD_Lexington_2018_261_282), 286.

### 2.3. Biopower: Sorting Life, Pre-empting Threats

Whereas sovereign power is episodic and theatrical, biopower operates through statistics, classification, and bureaucratic control. In the case of mahalla surveillance, this is made evident by the creation of religious risk profiles. Mahalla committees, in coordination with law enforcement, are instructed to collect data on residents' religious behaviors, including who prays, who has a beard, and who teaches Islam to children. These practices violate core rights to privacy and religious freedom yet are justified by the state through the lens of “preventing extremism.”

This role is further underscored by the mahalla's constitutional duty to support all state programs, including organizing logistics for state visits and reporting any unregistered religious association<sup>160</sup>. In practice, these laws turn the mahalla into a localized arm of the surveillance state. Mahalla Committees help law enforcement agencies across the country collect detailed information about residents' religious beliefs and practices, which feeds into national security infrastructure. Through door-to-door visits or by summoning individuals to their offices, committee members gather information's on who prays in unauthorized spaces, or who has a beard<sup>161</sup>. This surveillance infrastructure transforms the mahalla into an instrument of pre-emptive control, identifying individuals who may pose a threat not because of concrete actions, but due to their perceived religious profile.

This process exemplifies the biopolitical logic of categorizing life: individuals are sorted into “safe” and “risky” citizens. Those who exhibit visible signs of piety are often flagged as potential extremists. This does not merely enable pre-emptive policing – it constitutes a broader regime of bio-surveillance that governs life at the most intimate level.

Biopower, in the context of the Uzbek mahalla system, operates through the quiet, continuous monitoring and classification of citizens' lives. Unlike the spectacle of sovereign punishment or the behavioral regulation of disciplinary power, biopower normalizes state control by managing populations through data, risk assessment, and pre-emptive intervention. By embedding surveillance into the everyday structures of the mahalla, the state governs not only through what people do, but through who they are presumed to be.

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<sup>160</sup> O'zbekiston Respublikasining Qonuni, 14.04.1999 no. 758, “Fuqarolarning o'zini o'zi boshqarish organlari to'g'risida,” Art. 12, <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/86238>.

<sup>161</sup> Bogner, “From House to House,” 14.

## 2.4. Conclusion

Although Uzbekistan is classified as a fragile state, the mahalla plays a crucial role in mitigating this fragility from within. Far from being a relic of tradition or a mere unit of local self-governance, the mahalla functions as a vital node in the state's apparatus of control and legitimacy. Its contribution to state stability lies in its ability to internalize state power at the most local and intimate levels. By embedding Foucauldian sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower into a single institution, the mahalla enables for the state to manage risk, shape conduct, and neutralize dissent in a culturally legitimate and benign form. This layered form of governance is particularly effective in a context where overt repression might provoke resistance. Through the mahalla, control is disguised as tradition, and surveillance as social cohesion. It stabilizes not by empowering citizens, but by quietly producing governable subjects. In this way, the mahalla helps explain how a state marked by low scores in human rights and civil liberties can nonetheless maintain enduring political stability and regime resilience.

In sum, the mahalla system embodies the full spectrum of Foucauldian power. Sovereign power remains visible in the dramatic punishment of religious dissidents and the legal codification of religious legitimacy. Disciplinary power governs through the normalization of desirable behavior via moral surveillance and bureaucratic gatekeeping. Biopower, more quietly but no less potently, operates by cataloguing the population and their practices, turning believers into objects of statistical concern. The mahalla is a modern *dispositif* of security, enabling the Uzbek state to extend its authority into the most personal domains of life, not through overt repression alone, but through normalization, categorization, and anticipatory regulation.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated that the mahalla has become a central mechanism for the normalization of state power in Uzbekistan. By drawing on Foucault's concepts of governmentality, tripartite power, and securitization, this thesis has examined how the mahalla has evolved both structurally and functionally to become a uniquely effective instrument of state control in a post-Soviet, politically fragile context.

To support this claim, the study addressed two interrelated dimensions. First, it traced the structural evolution of the mahalla from a loosely organized, community-based entity into a formalized extension of the state. This evolution occurred through two complementary processes: symbolic elevation and institutional formalization. In the early years following independence, the Karimov regime positioned the mahalla as a uniquely "authentic" Uzbek tradition, invoking nationalist rhetoric to legitimize its role. This cultural legitimization was further supported by the institutionalization of the mahalla through legal frameworks such as the 1999 Mahalla Law. The mahalla was further embedded into the governance apparatus through the creation of hierarchical structures, task delegation, and the integration of new actors such as *posbons*, social workers, and tax inspectors.

This dual strategy of drawing legitimacy from invented tradition while simultaneously expanding bureaucratic oversight, allowed the state to normalize the mahalla as both a culturally familiar and institutionally authoritative presence in the daily lives of citizens. The effectiveness of this transformation lies not merely in the symbolic resonance of the mahalla, but in its ability to conduct real administrative, social, and even coercive functions. The mahalla is responsible for welfare distribution, dispute mediation, religious regulation, and even local surveillance – all under the guise of "community self-governance." This dynamic renders the mahalla a capillary site of power, where control is not imposed from above, but reproduced from within the community. In Foucault's terms, this marks the shift from sovereign to disciplinary and biopolitical forms of power: from ruling by decree to governing through dispersed, routinized mechanisms of normalization.

Second, the thesis examined how the mahalla contributes to the stability of the Uzbek state, particularly considering its continued classification as "fragile" on global governance indices and the turbulences within neighboring states. Despite systemic issues such as constrained political participation, limited judicial independence, and curtailed civil liberties, Uzbekistan has not experienced the mass instability observed in many post-Soviet

states. The mahalla plays a crucial role in this paradox. It acts as a stabilizing force not only by distributing basic welfare but also by channeling discontent into manageable administrative processes. More critically, the mahalla has become an instrument of state securitization. Through its proximity and perceived legitimacy, the mahalla became an effective tool for translating securitization into the intimate realm of daily life. Its committees not only monitor religious behavior but participate in compiling lists of those deemed potentially deviant, contributing to a regime of preventive control. This integration of sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical strategies enables the state to suppress opposition without resorting to overt, widespread violence. Instead, repression is normalized, and often internalized, by the population as community oversight or moral order. In a state where civil liberties are curtailed and democratic channels limited, the mahalla acts as a bridge between coercion and consent. It transforms the logic of exception into one of routine governance, ensuring that the state's reach extends into homes, beliefs, and bodies – often without significant resistance. As such, the mahalla does not merely enforce state policy; it naturalizes it.

In conclusion, the mahalla's continuous integration into state administration demonstrates the normalization of power in Uzbekistan through the convergence of traditional legitimacy and modern techniques of governance. It is at once a product of historical invention and legal design, a symbol of national continuity and an instrument of contemporary control. It stabilizes the state not by empowering citizens, but by rendering governance familiar, inevitable, and intimate. This thesis thus concludes that the mahalla stands as a paradigmatic case of how authoritarian resilience can be secured not through grand acts of repression, but through the quiet, daily disciplining of life itself.

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