

From Strong State to a Strong Civil Society: Domestic Discourse of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

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Abstract

Through a review of the works published by local academics, this paper aims to reveal that the concept of “civil society” continues to be mobilized and promoted in Uzbekistan’s extensive domestic literature, substantively under the terms and conditions of the existing political elite. The concept of “civil society” and its discourse amongst local intellectuals has proven in a way unique, largely owing to its quality to encompass and address a whole range of challenges of state-building. Another rationale behind this study is to test the normative assumption that, like most political, social and cultural issues, the individual application of the concept of civil society in post-communist, developing countries, such as Uzbekistan, is highly diverse, and as such, often tends to exhibit its own peculiarities.

Keywords: Civil Society, State, Uzbekistan, Post-Soviet state

Introduction

The concept of ‘civil society’ has been rapidly emerging in Uzbekistan’s both official and scholarly literature in the past two decades since its independence, and as the political elite strives to promote its own postulation of an evolutionary transition “from strong state to a strong civil society”, the interest in the subject among local intellectuals continues to grow.

As some foreign scholars have suggested, the fact that the Uzbek administrators and intellectuals themselves are claiming their own civil society should not be underestimated (Suda: 2006), because without understanding how the local conception of civil society is formed in relation with history, culture and power relations of the studied country, it is not easy to analyse the real nature of socio-political environment in Uzbekistan. This paper, therefore, can be considered an attempt to highlight the alternative vision of civil society which moves beyond the liberal approaches propagated by western governments and scholars. However, this review is far from comprehensive since the main goal has been to summarize some notable sources published by local intellectuals in primarily Uzbek and a few in Russian languages. The novelty of this effort boils down to interpretation of local sources relating to civil society and introducing them to non-Uzbek/non-Russian speaking scholars.

It is also worth pointing out that any characterization of civil society discourse in post-Soviet Uzbekistan would be incomplete without mentioning president Islam Karimov’s ideological texts related to civil society and democracy-building. By paraphrasing March (2003:212), it can be stated that the case of president Karimov is unique in the region not so much in his patterns of rule, but in his systematic, formal and self-conscious efforts to formulate, transmit and impose a country-specific form of civil society and democratization as a means of political legitimation. Indeed, the main bulk of president Karimov’s works, published as separate monographs as well as in a series of numbered volumes, are required reading throughout all levels of education in Uzbekistan and are heavily propagated through mass media, state institutions, intellectuals and organs of local self-government. The fact that any serious piece of research - article or monograph - in social and political sciences must contain at least a few references to Islam Karimov’s texts or speeches to be accepted for publication, force some authors to run to extremes by comprising their entire opuses of President’s quotations (Mamatov: 2010; Abdusattorov: 2011). Hence, in order to provide the bigger picture of civil society discourse in Uzbekistan, this paper will refer to a few of Karimov’s books and highlight his relevant points thereof.

In presenting a review of local civil society literature, the paper will address five major concerns. First, the paper will shed light on the theoretical debates upon which much of the local literature reflects its understanding of civil society. The second and third sections will explore connections between civil society and democratization as well as civil society and state, respectively. The fourth section will trace some trends in the debates about traditional neighbourhood associations, known as mahalla. Before sketching out concluding remarks, the fifth section will highlight domestic scholars’ understanding of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their wider social and political impact.

A Theoretical Conceptualization of Civil Society

The theoretical debates on the nature of civil society in the scholarship of post-Soviet Uzbekistan have proven a challenge. The difficulty arises not because civil society is an abstract phenomenon or it is so widespread in contemporary political practices and intellectual discourses, but rather because any local theorist focusing on

civil society needs to ensure that none of the articulated ideas is at odds with the core “principles of establishing a constitutional democratic state and open civil society in Uzbekistan” put forward by republic’s president Islam Karimov since 1991.

There are at least two explanations of this trend: first, since the theorization of civil society to some extent entails some form of critical thinking about the object of research, many local scholars feared that any attempt to carry out a critical evaluation of either form or content of Uzbekistan’s civil society may be considered as potentially oppositional deviation from the official concept. Secondly, a large number of Uzbekistan’s social scientists have lived and worked most of their life under the former Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology which determined what can and should be said, as well as the limits of the “communicable” (Casier: 1999). The Soviet ideology obliged people to respect a certain set of rules in communication. Furthermore, the point was not one of belief, but of respect: one need not “believe” in the ideology but in order to be taken seriously as a participant in the relevant ideological discourse, one must be committed to it (Schull: 1992).

Accordingly, the general direction of theoretical writings in Uzbekistan’s civil society literature, which began to grow from the late 1990s, was heavily influenced by and constructed around the concept proposed by the ruling elite. A quick glance at the nature of this civil society theory shows that to a larger extent this discourse is dominated by a Hegelian perspective, which views the state as “an important arbiter of competing interests and the reflection of prevailing ones” (Alagappa: 2004), and to a lesser extent by a liberal interpretation where “autonomous non-state organizations from trade unions to social movements struggle in the competition of interests and ideas” (Keane: 1998).

Indeed, the concept and related discourses of civil society in Uzbekistan are connected fundamentally by their attempt to describe differences between the Western and Eastern notions of civil society, in both their theoretical definition and their historical existence, and highlight the “reformist role of the state” in public sphere. This is in contrast to the civil society literature from post-communist Eastern Europe where both political elites and scholars are united by the viewpoint of civil society as an alternative to the state; and, in a more practical sense, by the commitment to preserve some limited amount of social independence and to give it an institutionalized expression (Narozhna: 2004).

Specifically, such a trend is evident in one of Islam Karimov’s early ideological texts, in which argues that the break-up of the Soviet Union offered the historic opportunity to critically rethink the past, strengthen national institutions, and revive the country’s centuries-long cultural heritage and its traditional civil society. The latter has combined the features of the Eastern philosophy and Islamic values which facilitated local people’s aspirations towards social justice and spiritual enlightenment. Thus, in Karimov’s view, any decent attempt to revive the concept of civil society in Uzbekistan will render unsuccessful without a great emphasis on the wisdoms and knowledge derived from the works of local thinkers, including Yassavy, Naqshbandi, al-Bukhari, at-Termizi, Amir Temur, Ulug’bek, Navoiy and Bobur (Karimov, 1995).

On the other hand, Karimov admits that the formation of a genuine civil society cannot rest solely on national values, but such efforts should also incorporate the universally recognized principles of democracy, such as freedom of expression, the majority rule, the equality of all citizens before the law. The latter, in his view, constitutes the core of democratic governance exercised by civilized nations.

Since for Karimov any democratic process is regulated by certain objective laws (ob’ektiv qonuniyatlar), he argues that the prospects for establishing civil society in Uzbekistan can only be examined in light of at least three such laws (1995: 8-10). According to the first law, building a strong civil society in Uzbekistan requires a clear knowledge of local political realities within which the “eastern” traditions of democracy and associational life of citizens have formed. Historically the process of democratization in the East has rested on a balanced and evolutionary approach to transition, which helped to avoid revolutionary leaps accompanied by dangerous consequences. Karimov’s takes this chance to state that even some western scholars viewed revolution as “a primitive and chaotic form of social change” (1995: 8). Secondly, citizens’ political culture has to be mature enough to apprehend and catch up with the pace of democratic changes. It is argued that regardless of the efforts to facilitate democratic change, it is the people at grass-root level who ultimately determine the success of undertaken reforms.

Finally, the third objective law identifies national mentality and local culture as a bulwark for a functioning civil society and effective democratic institutions. To be specific, the emphasis is placed on the articulation of differences between Western notion of “individualism” and Eastern “collectivist” culture. By describing individualism as the “main cause of excessive politicization of masses” (1995: 9), Karimov perhaps echoes Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic argument which viewed “individualism as a moderate form of egoism, which in the long run attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness, and is, therefore, potentially destructive for public life” (Narozhna: 2004).

Karimov’s approach to civil society has stimulated a long-lasting debate among Uzbek scholars. The most prominent theoretical debate was initiated by Sharifkhodjaev who defines civil society as a sophisticated form of

social engineering which can only evolve in a free democratic environment. Within such an environment, although all individuals are independent from one another and the state, they choose to interact and find solutions together. For Sharifkhodjaev, the fundament upon which a genuine civil society rests is free, conscious and equal individuals (Sharifkhodjaev, 2003: 7).

In addition, any civil society is functionally and structurally fragile if it exists in an environment that resists any political and ideological pluralism, freedom of expression and press. On the other hand, for Sharifkhodjaev, the idea of civil society is intertwined with the concept of a civic lawful society (*fuqarolik huquqiy jamiyati*) featuring two distinctive characteristics: first, every individual is considered free and equal citizen until proven guilty; and secondly, every citizen can act freely provided that legal and moral norms are not violated (2003: 21). In author's opinion, civil society denotes a set of non-state voluntary associations which promote economic, social, cultural, spiritual, moral, family and religious ties. The cluster of such informal organizations within a community prevents potential disintegration of the social fabric. Such institutions will be successful if reinforced by a workable legal system which guarantees their free and sustainable activity. For Sharifkhodjaev, the integrative process of the sociological, ideological and legal aspects constitutes the basis for understanding civil society (2003: 24-28).

The authors examined so far could be summed up by an assertion that the historical-cultural and national-religious characteristics of the region's countries are modifying the structure of civil society in ways that are turning the nationwide consolidation processes into something of a mindbender for researchers (Ergashev: 2004). This trend coupled with the growing geopolitical role of the Central Asian countries is giving research of the evolution of democratic institutions in these republics vital scientific significance.

Connecting civil society with democratic institutions

As some foreign researchers have suggested, in present day Uzbekistan, civil society is not about the existence of counterbalancing organs or freedom of speech. Similarly, Uzbekistan is considered neither an urban society of free citizens, nor a bourgeois society formed by a particular modern historical experience. What is being discussed instead here is civil society associated with "democracy to be constructed by the newly independent state" (Suda: 2006). Therefore, the concept of civil society and the issue of democracy-building are closely connected in Uzbekistan.

For instance, in his widely propagated book *"Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Challenges to Stability and Progress"* president Karimov holds the view that democratic principles and institutions are dominating more and more in all spheres of life (Karimov: 1997).

While reiterating that Uzbekistan's Constitution is the basis for any legislation and exercise of political power, Karimov stresses that the Basic law codifies the fundamental rules, values and principles of Uzbek democracy. The Constitution distinguishes the individual as the superior value, and, thus, politically provides a reasonable legal expression of the relationship between citizen, society and the state, and thereby facilitates formation of a civil society (1997: 166-167).

Karimov is a vocal advocate of the idea that the democratic content of power structures is determined, to a large extent, by how actively citizens participate in the management of public affairs. While it is admitted that although the legislative basis for such participation in Uzbekistan has already been set up, it is still necessary to promote a climate in which citizens understand and use their inherent right to participate in public management. For Karimov, a vibrant civil society can only function in a stable and sustainable political system in which all legal democratic conditions for the realization of citizens' political interests are created, and a majority of the population engages in political decision-making on a voluntary or a professional basis.

While discussing the vitality of the relationship between democracy and civil society, Karimov argues that it is difficult to avoid two important issues related to opposition as a political force and mass media. Firstly, according to Karimov, the existence of a legitimate and constructive opposition with a powerful political message is a normal manifestation in a civilized democratic system. However, it is argued that prior to this a healthy political opposition must set up a proper organizational structure, an adequate legal status, and show respect of constitutional and legislative norms, be responsible for its actions and able to offer an alternative platform for political and societal development. Having articulated these important criteria, Karimov appears to label Uzbekistan's political opposition as immature and weak consisting of overly ambitious people who consider themselves offended not to be given cherished positions in the government, and who in pursuing clan and local interests oppose every positive development agenda in the country. Nevertheless, he points out that the formation of a democratic opposition is a question of time, being in essence part of the painful process of the consolidation of democratic institutions in Uzbekistan, in the same way as other states undergoing transition from totalitarian to democratic system (1997: 168-169).

Secondly, Karimov's advances on the role of mass media as genuine facilitator of social change, and importantly as a transmitter of civil society's message to the people. Yet, the former often comes under serious criticism,

when he argues that the Uzbek mass media of the day is not fully aware of its key functions, such as helping identify the most pressing social issues or holding policy-makers to account. Not surprisingly, he concludes in favour of further liberalization of mass media designed to facilitate the gradual emergence of stronger civil society in Uzbekistan (1997: 170-171). In sum, Karimov shows that the strength of Uzbek democracy should and could lie in actively engaged citizens who take responsibility for building communities, solving public problems, and participating in the political and electoral processes (1997: 180).

An independent political analyst Tolipov argues that in order to assess real-life democratic progress one should recognize the existence of another problem - the gap between democracy *de jure* and democracy *de facto* in Uzbekistan. In Tolipov's opinion, the former means that the legislative and institutional forms of democratic governance are in place; the latter—that the form has an adequate content, i.e. that the laws are being implemented while the democratic institutions are functioning without hindrance. His analysis, however, reveals a gap between *de jure* and *de facto* democracy in Uzbekistan in several spheres of democratic construction (Tolipov: 2008).

This gap seems to have little in common with the official course aimed at liberalizing the economic, legal, and spiritual spheres announced in 1999 by country's political establishment. This course aimed at promoting the new principle of state- and society-building known as "From strong state to a strong civil society", which in Tolipov's view, was expected to replace one of the five key principles of economic and political reforms in Uzbekistan during the early period of independence, recognizing "a state as the chief reformer." More specifically, Tolipov maintains that one of such gaps is evident in relation to party politics. He argues that the process of forming a party system as the key element of civil society is stalled in Uzbekistan. As far as the programs, provisions, and specific political activities of Uzbekistan's parties are concerned, on the political scene they are practically indistinguishable. This issue is linked to the weakness of the Uzbek parliament (Oliy Majlis) itself when it comes to independent activity of its members. Tolipov seems to acknowledge that whatever their rights on paper, members of parliament are inert, dependent and incapable of expressing different opinions (Tolipov: 2008).

Finally, a more vocal supporter of the official line, Qirgizboev holds that political parties play a key role in strengthening civil society because they establish a link with the entire political system, and are responsible for its public oversight. In support of his argument, Qirgizboev refers to the constitutional provision that maintains that "political parties shall express the political will of various sections and groups of the population and through their democratically elected representatives shall participate in the formation of state authority" (2010: 111). For him, it is key that the Constitution views political parties along with trade unions, scientific societies, women's, veterans' and youth leagues and professional associations registered and operating with a legal framework as having the status of public associations. This interpretation seems to be at odds with a critical distinction commonly made between civil society and political parties which admits that the latter seek to control state power while civil society organizations do not (USAID: 2004). Yet, Qirgizboev lists a few civil society functions, including stimulating participation and building political skills, representation of interests, recruiting and training new political leaders, and strengthening the state, which could similarly be ascribed to political parties (2010: 114).

Bridging the State and Civil Society

One of the most debatable issues among Uzbek scholars in considering civil society is perhaps its relationship to the state. For instance, Sharifkhodjaev's view on the state-civil society dichotomy is attributable to the theoretical traditions derived from the philosophic thoughts of Hegel, who regarded the state as a political framework for civil society and considered civil society as subordinate to the state. In this respect, the Uzbek scholar in a way opposes the mainstream liberal approach which holds that civil society is located in the conceptual space distinct from that of the state and the market, and can therefore stand on its own, without political support (Sharifkhodjaev, 2003: 22).

Unlike Sharifkhodjaev, Odilqoriev appears to be less supportive of the state, arguing that civil society is a self-organized institution based on the system of orderly relations between citizens, and therefore independent from the state (2002: 172). Since civil society consists of various associations and non-governmental organizations, they are designed to represent and at times protect the individual rights and freedoms. As a rule, these organizations are independent from the state authorities and function in accordance with the principle of self-organization and self-management (2002: 173).

Khuseynova is critical of the latter view, because in her view it echoes the Western mainstream conception which tends not to link civil society with state, but on the contrary, attempts to minimize the role of the state in building civil society institutions (2009: 28). This author's explanation of the relationship between civil society and the state resonates with Georg Simmel's dichotomy in which any social phenomenon is composed of two inseparable elements: content that includes the interest, purpose, or motive of the phenomenon or interaction,

and form which resembles the mode of interaction among individuals through/in the shape of which the specific content achieves social reality. Importantly, the existence of society requires a reciprocal interaction among its individual elements, mere spatial or temporal aggregation of parts is considered insufficient (Levine: 1972).

As such, in Khuseynova's opinion, under the conditions of high political uncertainty symptomatic of a post-communist state such as Uzbekistan, building effective civil society requires sufficient administrative and ideational capital of the state. In other words, she argues, that it is difficult to imagine the civil society operating successfully without the state because the citizens are protected by the laws of the state. It is claimed that a genuine civil society can only form when the state is willing to replace its coercive function with a mission aimed at facilitating necessary conditions which will incentivize civic activism as a whole (2009: 29).

Offering her interpretation of a widely-propagated political slogan "from strong state to a strong civil society", Khuseynova argues that in times of uncertainty, especially during transition, only a strong state can establish the rule of law and prevent a disorderly spread and even stagnation of civil society institutions (2009: 28). The author points out that even those Western academics who previously preferred a rather limited role of the state in promoting social capital, have changed their views by now.

Particularly, Khuseynova seems to refer to Francis Fukuyama's view that one "factor affecting the prospects for stable democracy has to do with a society's ability to autonomously create a healthy civil society – a sphere in which a people are able to exercise Tocqueville's "art of associating", free from the reliance on the state" (Fukuyama: 1993) and his more recent emphasis on the "stateness" based on the assumption that the international community must do a better job of state-building ... because weak or failed states are the sources of many of the world's most serious problems" (Fukuyama: 2004). While recognizing the state and civil society as social and cultural structures which facilitate people's political, social, economic and cultural interactions, Khuseynova points out that both the state and civil society must engender a new relationship as they are now targets of the impact of globalization (2009: 28).

Another view on the relationship between the state and civil society has been voiced by a legal expert Islamov who maintains that the difference between the nature of civil society and the state does not translate to confrontation between them (2004: 53-59). Islamov like most of Uzbekistan's intellectuals, centers his civil society argument on promoting the role and image of the state. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, this logic has dominated in the Uzbek civil society studies since early 1990s and has been linked to one of the president Karimov's widely publicized "five principles" of state-building and reform – "state as the chief reformer".

Communal Civil Society and Mahalla institution

The entry on Central Asia in *The International Encyclopedia of Civil Society* has defined "communal civil society" as a "sphere for social interaction on a voluntary basis in which individuals exchange information and deliberate collective action". In the Central Asian context, these exchanges and deliberations are highly informal and therefore often overlooked. (Kimairis: 2010).

Indeed, if one narrows definition of civil society to Western notions, then Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, have not had a tradition of civil society in their modern history. But if one widens the understanding of what constitutes the "civil" sphere, it is found the traditional elements of the region's people and history lends itself to the essential values of civility, associated with strong networks of familiar and community support with kinship and tribal connections within and across villages that is an important element of civil society (Sajoo: 2002). In a similar vein, Suda suggested that "notwithstanding the aspersions of human rights organizations and international press, a closer look shows that Uzbekistan has a rich experience of associational life of citizens" (2006: 345).

The traditional community-based organization, known as mahalla, has persisted in Uzbekistan for the duration of communist rule, and since country's independence is considered to be the basis for any form of legitimate collective action. Throughout country's history, the mahalla, composed of prominent community elders (mahalla oqsoqoli) and activists (faollar), worked to support the interests of the community through advocacy and served as a type of quasi-institutional body for resolving citizens' disputes.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the main focus of significant politico-administrative reforms in post-Soviet Uzbekistan has been on the recognition of the mahalla institution as the foundation of traditional civil society. Notably, Karimov claimed that in order to develop and to raise society to a higher stage, some of the state's control and administrative duties, should be reduced, and social and non-governmental organizations, citizens' groups and bodies should take its place. Karimov calls mahalla "a unique, inimitable social organ of administration that we can never compare with anything else... which developed over hundreds of years' time and made wholly anew in the period of independence, perfected for present requirements" (Karimov: 2002). By and large, Islam Karimov's reflection on mahalla institution as an indigenous form of local self-government and bedrock of "the Uzbek type of civil society" has inspired numerous local academics to further elaborate on this topic.

For example, Gadoyboev and Rahimov consider mahalla as “a democratically-run, administrative-territorial body considered as an ideological platform for reviving the ancient traditions and culture of the Uzbek people” (2003: 7). In particular, it is argued that mahalla is the most effective tool to counter both old and new “ideological threats” and prevent the spread of “destructive ideas” in the minds of citizens. Mahalla is unique in that it constitutes a social organization capable of filling the “ideological vacuum” that has emerged in the society soon after the breakup of the Soviet system.

Secondly, mahalla institution is considered a bedrock for guaranteeing peace and stability within a state. The argument here is that in a multi-ethnic country such as Uzbekistan, the government alone cannot insure peace and tolerance between different groups without engaging institutions at the grass-root level. Here and elsewhere the reference is made to the terrorist attacks in the capital city of Tashkent in 1999, following which the mahalla councils have been held responsible for upholding citizens’ vigilance and organizing the work of the voluntary neighbourhood watch groups (mahalla posponlari).

Thirdly, according to these authors, mahalla unlike any other form of civil society, carries an enormous potential in bringing-up the younger generation and meeting its needs. It is suggested that while instilling a sense of patriotism, personal integrity and responsibility, on the other hand, mahalla is directly involved in addressing pressing problems of an uneducated and unemployed youth (2003: 8, 64).

Akmal Saidov holds a similar view, suggesting that ‘education of a healthy generation must be carried out based on the national tradition and life experience of our ancestors’ (Saidov: 2003). Writing about “mahalla as a national institution of democracy and civil society”, the author argues that while encouraging the attachment to all individuals’ mahalla, home, and city, it is necessary to turn the attachment also to the Homeland. Individuals, then, must be citizens with political solidarity that transcends ethnic divisions, regions and center-periphery divisions.

The above discussed features of “mahalla as potentially dynamic facilitators of development” (Sievers, 2002) and its presumed familiarity with local needs as an indigenous, grass-roots and long standing association of citizens led both political leadership and intellectuals in Uzbekistan to consider mahalla as the healthiest form of civil society.

Sharifkhodjaev and Akhunova’s collective study sought to connect the notion of local self-governance and civil society while assessing the social impact of mahalla (Sharifkhodjaev and Akhunova). While agreeing with Levitin that “mahalla is the atomic structure of traditional social life of the Uzbeks, the principal institution of traditional democracy in the Uzbek society” (Levitin: 2001), they argued that over the centuries the mahalla has been gradually emerging as one of the three intertwined features of indigenous collective life, the other two being family and Islam (2005: 7). The authors claim that while being deeply rooted in the nation’s history, traditions, customs and the Qur’anic precepts, mahalla has played a crucial role in enhancing the system of relationship between people and establishing their ethical code of conduct. To a greater extent, it was mahalla that helped to shape the democratic nature of the local government, has contributed to the development of the code of respect for elders and juniors, promoted the ideas of mutual help, team work (hashar), and hospitality (2005: 14).

Despite the fact that the Soviet apparatchiks sought to limit and sometimes prohibit the economic and philanthropic activity of the mahalla, thereby undermining its status as a legal institutionalized authority, Sharifkhodjaev and Akhunova underline that in the end the Soviets had no choice but to come to terms with such an influential long-established organization. The compromise was based on the assumption that mahalla committees should coexist with the relevant social structures, and must complement them. Therefore, the success of reforms aimed at improving local self-governance in independent Uzbekistan, like in most of post-Soviet countries, depended upon the pace of “de-Sovietization” of mahalla (2005: 26). By elaborating on its contemporary potential, the authors claim that in the current socio-political environment “the mahalla is no longer a small screw in the hierarchical system of executive power, on the contrary, it has evolved as the nucleus of power involving a large number of people in local self-governance and performing a great deal of managerial and representative functions” (2005: 4).

In sum, it can be stated that most of the Uzbek scholars seem to follow the line that because of the shared interests and values within the mahalla neighbourhood, based on the spirit of reciprocity and good-neighbourliness, it both represents and embodies an indigenous institution of civil society.

On the Role of NGOs

According to Mercer, the western NGO literature inspired by the works of Alexis de Tocqueville, Robert Putnam and other scholars reproduces the liberal maxim, suggesting that by virtue of their existence as autonomous actors, NGOs help pluralize and reinforce the institutional arena. In other words, more civic actors generate more opportunities for a wider range of interest groups to have a ‘voice’, more autonomous organizations to act in a ‘watchdog’ role vis-à-vis the state, and more opportunities for networking and creating alliances of civic actors

to place pressure on the state (Mercer: 2002).

One of the difficulties to apply the western NGO concept to a wider context of Uzbekistani civil society rests on the very nature of the state and NGO relationship. The latter carefully follows state's directives on what they should do and how they are ought to operate, while being aware that any "misconduct" by a non-governmental entity might be "dealt with the full power of the law". For the same reason, only a very few number of NGOs have had opportunities to engage in advocacy or lobbying for their specific beneficiaries.

Since 2003, this trend has become common owing to a large extent to the wave of the so-called colour revolutions that struck Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan and effectively turned the political elites in Uzbekistan suspicious of the potential NGO role as a catalyst for regime change. Here, it is worth mentioning the presidential address before the parliament in 2005, warning against the dangers from foreign-sponsored NGO's operating outside their charter and often carrying biased agendas (Uzbekistan Third Sector Survey: 2007). Soon after the address, the government had authorized a comprehensive control over NGOs' internal and external sources of funding and initiated the creation of a government watchdog - the National Association of NGOs, also known as NANNOUz (e.g. Shadmanov: 2010).

Perhaps, given the political sensitivity of the matter, most of local authors rarely focus extensively on the role of NGOs, writing instead on "social organizations" and "public associations" *de facto* operating under the state control. For instance, Turaqulov focuses of the central role of public structures (jamoat tuzilmalari) within Uzbek civil society which not only reflect different opinions of the population, but also actively influence the formation of public opinion (Turaqulov, 2003: 3-5). As Suda put it, "such a tendency of authorizing publicness from above is reminiscent of Hegel, who discredited free opinion as a mere formality and demoted the public sphere as a means of education" (Suda, 2006: 359).

Elaborating further on the issue, Turaqulov argues that the construction of a democratic state and formation of civil society in Uzbekistan depends on the force of legal-constitutional guarantees for an independent activity of non-state institutions, public organizations and movements, as well as the local organs of self-government (2003:7). Moreover, having examined the contemporary pace of democratization in Uzbekistan, he concludes that the quality of such organizations lags behind the present-day requirements. Similar to some authors mentioned above, Turaqulov argues that the problem rests on a thorny path toward eliminating the relics of the communist ways of thinking. In author's view, the possible solution lies in the success of the government's human resources policy and its ability to nurture a new generation of leaders equipped with critical thinking and problem-solving skills (2003:7).

Other authors went further and sought to provide justification for state's interest to regulate NGO activity. In his view, from the early stages of the country's socio-political and cultural-spiritual development, the state will heavily rely on the activity of public associations, assuming that "the more vigorous and influential are the actions of mass organizations (ommaviy tashkilotlar), the more actively will the citizens engage in reforming the state" (2000: 10). For these reasons, a state should be interested in "enhancing the network of non-governmental organizations, provided that they operate in line with the principles of constructing state and society in Uzbekistan, and help facilitate citizens' political, legal, socio-economic activeness, involve in strengthening relevant legal norms, draft and review their development concept as well as constantly gain knowledge of up-to-date international expertise" (2000: 11).

Although it is claimed that "the state has guaranteed the protection of their legal rights and ensured equal freedoms for social engagement" (2000: 9), Tangriev, nonetheless, believes that a large number of public structures are incapable of driving substantive social change. His concerns are threefold and are encrusted in the nature of these organizations.

Author's first concern is with some degree of malfunctioning and dishonesty within public organizations with respect to spending government-provided aid and abusing tax preferences provided to them by the state at the time of their initiation. These led to the prioritization of private interests over those of an organization. Tangriev suggested that the problem is to do with a declining number of devoted managers and staff within non-governmental entities with a clear vision of the goals of their organizations, as well as the lack of specialized agencies monitoring the spending of government-provided aid (2000:14).

Secondly, in author's opinion, most of the non-governmental public organizations have yet to get rid of persistent habits of work by receiving orders from the top or engaging in propagandist campaigns (companiyabozlik) in schools, universities or government-affiliated agencies. In Tangriev's words, no substantive efforts are being made to put forward new initiatives for social change or engage ordinary people in rural villages and mahalla to encourage public participation in the advancement of reforms. It is, therefore, quite natural that the general public does not feel the presence of an NGO or other similar structures that could extend their hand of assistance in difficult times or protect the interests of citizens (2000: 15). And finally, the author believes that an out-dated and highly- bureaucratic organizational structure of these entities too do not allow them to work effectively (2000: 16).

It is clear that in Uzbekistan's civil society studies, NGOs similar to other civil society organizations, are interpreted from a range of standpoints as providers of structural support for emerging pluralistic society, and as a principal actors in the enhancement of state's legitimacy.

Conclusion

The main aim of this literature review has been to test the normative assumption that, like most political, social and cultural issues, the individual application of the concept of civil society in post-socialist developing countries, including Uzbekistan, is highly diverse, and as such, tends to exhibit its own peculiarities. Indeed, as the paper has sought to reveal, given its unique ability to encompass and address a whole range of problems of the state-building, the concept of "civil society" continues to be mobilized and promoted in Uzbekistan's scholarly literature, albeit substantively under the terms and conditions of the existing political elite. In sum, the following general observations can be made with respect to the body of works reviewed above.

First, the thrust of the theoretical discourse of civil society within the Uzbek scholarship is built around conceptions heavily articulated by President Islam Karimov and is based on the desire to accentuate differences between the liberal and "orientalist" notions of civil society, in both their theoretical definition and historical existence, while suggesting that that efforts to build a genuine civil society and effective democratic institutions in Uzbekistan should take account of the peculiar features of local history, mentality and political culture.

Secondly, the majority of the Uzbek intellectuals view civil society as being organically intertwined with the larger democratization process, arguing that the construction of a democratic constitutional state and civil society should be led by actively engaged citizens who promote democratic values, participate in the public life, and generate consent.

Thirdly, on the relationship between the state and civil society, and by echoing republic's president Karimov, a large number of local authors tend to cast doubt on the western view that civil society is located in the conceptual space distinct from that of the state and can therefore stand on its own, without state's political and economic support. Instead, by articulating the famous home-grown slogan "from strong state to a strong civil society", the Uzbek scholars vigorously claim that it is a strong state which should be considered a bedrock for democratic reforms, and as such, promote the environment in which a genuine civil society can flourish.

Fourthly, in the context of a "communal civil society" postulations, the local mahalla institution has become and will certainly remain a popular topic for Uzbek civil society studies, especially, given that it is viewed as central to both practical efforts to facilitate citizens' participation and promote grassroots development. Its potential is especially vivid in its potential to harness "democracy of an Uzbek kind" and engender immunity against hostile ideologies.

And, finally, some works showed that the local intellectuals are less enthusiastic to engage in debates on the role of independent NGOs, especially evident since colored revolts in Georgia, Ukraine and neighboring Kyrgyzstan. Instead, they prefer to focus on the role of government-supported public structures and associations. Apparently, in light of recent revolutionary explosions in the Arab World this trend may persist in the foreseeable future.

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