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Clientelism and The State in Uzbekistan

Abstract. *In my paper, I argue that the patron-client relationships one can observe in post-Soviet Uzbekistan's civil service and beyond seriously challenge the emergence of a modern state. It appears that state and society are not properly differentiated and the public and private spheres overlap. I interpret clientelistic practices as manifestations of a pre-modern social order. Ibn Khaldun's cyclical model of constant elite rotation that is based on clientelistic principles elucidates the functional logic of the Uzbek state in the 21st century. However, there is also the Soviet experience that left an imprint on the specific mechanism of informal relations.*

Keywords: Uzbekistan, clientelism, state, differentiation, Lebenswelt, elite rotation, Ibn Khaldun.

In this paper, I want to take a closer look at the phenomenon of clientelism and ask to what extent it may have an influence on the emergence of a modern state.¹ In the framework of the Soviet project of social engineering, political authorities once already tried hard to eradicate what Olivier Roy (2000: 85–89) calls solidarity groups.² To create the New Soviet person, old forms of social organization had to be overcome. The individual was supposed to identify with the collective, which in the countryside took the form of the *kolkhoz*.³ However, the traditional structures proved much more persistent than expected and even the fusion of single *kolkhozes*—thereby creating the new *sovkhos* system—did not have the desired effect. Instead of vanishing, the established forms of social organization—among them clientelism—adapted to the changing circumstances. Achievement in the form of political power or prosperity continued to be gained through informal networks (Khazanov 2011: 28–29).

¹ Throughout the text, I make use of research materials accumulated in the context of an anthropological study on the aspirations of young male Uzbeks in the capital Tashkent and the representation of work. A book on this topic is currently in the publication process.

² According to Roy (2000: 86), these more traditional alliances have changed since independence. He identifies urbanisation as one of the causes for the increase of networks no longer attached to territory.

³ See also: Oushakine, 2004.

The post-Soviet condition in Uzbekistan can be characterized in much the same way. People seek personal relations in networks of solidarity, whether one is a civil servant or a farmer (Petric 2011: 170). To sustain a power balance among the regional factions, the Uzbek president grants and withdraws offices (Petric 2011: 167–168, 172). Officials further down in the administrative hierarchy are less concerned with balancing power, but they likewise engage in clientelistic practices when allocating positions (Khazanov 2011: 29).

It seems that, despite the Soviet endeavor of creating a modern state and society, clientelism informs the political and social reality in Uzbekistan to a degree that seriously inhibits development.⁴ According to Chabal and Daloz (2006: 227–229), several processes led in the European context to the birth of the state: centralization, monopolization, differentiation and institutionalization. In a centralized state, a central and supreme authority is assigned the exercise of power. Monopolization refers to the exclusive entitlement of the state to make use of military means and taxation. With the establishment of a bureaucracy comes the differentiation of state and society—a development that contributes to the separation of the public and private spheres. Finally, Chabal and Daloz understand institutionalization as the written codification of laws all citizens must adhere to.

I would like to concentrate my attention on the third point, as the process of differentiation may never have sufficiently taken place in Uzbekistan. Although there exists an administrative state system in Uzbekistan, the public and private spheres do not seem to be clearly separated. For a modern state, an impersonal system of government that treats individuals as equal citizens with the same rights and obligations is a central idea. Yet, in contemporary Uzbek society, individuals with contacts to influential office-holders enjoy advantages and their trust remains with personal relations instead of the institutionalized state.⁵ Conditions within the Uzbek civil service, it appears, have much in common with the logic at work on the African continent as claimed by Chabal and Daloz.⁶ The state service described by the social scientists is defined by particularistic interests—a determining factor in regard to the interpretation of regulations and the use of office—as well as personalized relations (Chabal; Daloz 1999: 7). In a modern state as conceived by Max Weber, however,

⁴ For more information on the Soviet Union as a modernising project, see Plaggenborg (2006).

⁵ One must keep in mind that the modern state as it emerged in Europe is just one mode of political organisation among many (Chabal; Daloz, 2006: 226).

⁶ In their book “Africa Works”, Chabal and Daloz (1999: 4) argue that the state in Africa was never properly emancipated from society. The authors seem to have exchanged the term emancipation for differentiation at a later point.

institutions would have supremacy over individuals and not the other way around (Weber 2005: 160–161, 186–188).

I do not want to withhold from the reader another notable analysis of the differentiation of state and society. For the sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1995), the state is contained in what he calls the *System* (system), whereas society is an aspect of the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld). Modernization, Habermas argues, takes place in the form of rationalization, which has two aspects to it. Firstly, the three components of the *Lebenswelt*—culture, society and personality (which in traditional societies are interdependent)—disengage and gain autonomy (Habermas 1995: 209, 219–223). Secondly, on a higher level, *System* and *Lebenswelt* become separate from one another (Habermas 1995: 230–234). While in traditional societies the worldview with its norms and values completely envelops the kin-based social structure, this unity comes to an end when evolution pulls both spheres apart, making the *System* more complex and the *Lebenswelt* more rational.⁷ The administrative and economic aspects of the system gradually alter, and the whole complex moves into a position outside of the *Lebenswelt*. In the process, the state displaces kinship as the main principle of social order (Habermas 1995: 250, 261–265). Norms are being codified and we can eventually observe the establishment of a binding legal system. Modern law sets a frame wherein citizens can go about their activities, private businesses operate and officeholders exercise their duties, but it also regulates the actions of self-seeking individuals. If following the law does not seem reasonable in itself, there is the threat of punishment that accompanies its violation. When law is strictly enforced and no exceptions made for anyone, people can no longer claim to be entitled to an office due to their lineage. In the modern economy and administration, the *Lebenswelt* is not required to coordinate agency (Habermas 1995: 273). Private affairs do not interfere with professional ones and the workflow improves. By indicating the legal justification of the measures they take, civil servants can reject any kind of criticism on moral grounds, for instance. In addition, entrepreneurs may expand their commercial efforts, as long as they do not break the law. Normative claims are irrelevant in a sphere dominated by a functionalist rationality. When *System* and *Lebenswelt* are still interlinked, though—as would be the case in a weak state—the institutions with their rules and regulations only have limited authority, while more traditional principles guide people's conduct and agency (Habermas 1995: 268–270). Allegiance lies with respected and influential individuals or families, whereas state institutions are ranked secondary in significance.

⁷ One may, of course, criticise evolutionary models for being Eurocentric.

When considering the conditions in post-Soviet Uzbekistan with the theoretical model of Habermas in mind, one may argue that *System* and *Lebenswelt* do not appear to be fully separated.⁸ The outside observer will have no difficulty recognizing the value of money and power in Uzbek society, where some strive for success with a business endeavor and others work hard to obtain a superior position in the civil service. The state in Uzbekistan is an authority to be taken seriously. Inside the state system, however, interaction is affected by a non-functionalist rationality. This is illustrated by the advantage of personal relations in the process of applying for a position, the prevalence of the bond between *ustoz* and *shogird* and the permanent need to demonstrate loyalty to the workplace superior within bureaucratic structures.⁹ The great significance of *obro'*, or personal status, in Uzbek society could be interpreted as another indication for the enduring impact of the *Lebenswelt* on the way people relate to one another.

If not a truly modern one, what kind of state are we then concerned with here? The cyclical model of constant elite rotation (Ibn Khaldun 2011; Gellner 1994, 1995), which is based on clientelistic principles, does, in my eyes, seem well suited to describe the functional logic of the state in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Ibn Khaldun, a scholar and jurist who lived in the 14th century in the politically unstable Maghreb and later Egypt, originally developed the idea. He served as vizier, envoy and judge under different masters, and, for his major work—the *muqaddimah*, which was supposed to be the introduction to a world history Ibn Khaldun never realised—he is regarded as a pioneer of modern sociology and history. The model of society as set out in the book is strongly influenced by the difficult political circumstances Ibn Khaldun lived through (Giese 2011: 45). He differentiates between two different modes of existence: the nomadic way of life in the desert and the sedentary one in the city (Ibn Khaldun 2011: 147–148, 160). Every once in a while, the nomads—held together by a feeling of group solidarity, or *asabiyyah*—pack up their tents and attack the city. The austerity of their life in the wilderness has made them tough and they defeat the city dwellers, who are not used to fighting. The former nomads now become rulers in the city and establish their own dynasty (Ibn Khaldun 2011: 163, 170, 187–188). They indulge in the pleasures granted by their superior rank, such as feasting, drinking, lovemaking and the consumption of narcotics. As

⁸ Ledeneva (1998: 84) mentions the personalisation of formal contacts in the Soviet Union.

⁹ The bond between *ustoz* (master or mentor) and *shogird* (apprentice or protégé) is a relation of classical patronage: While the *shogird* is protected from above by the *ustoz* and can succeed him at some point, the *ustoz* gains respect among his colleagues with his able *shogird* and he can actually trust him, which is of great significance on the higher rungs of the career ladder. In my forthcoming book, I devote a chapter to this important social institution.

they get used to a lifestyle of comfort and delight, a deterioration of the group solidarity—the source of their whole power—takes place. After three or four generations, the dynasty has become so weak that it is swept away in a new attack of fierce nomadic warriors from the desert (Ibn Khaldun 2011: 192–195).

Let us now take a closer look at the term *asabiyyah*, since it is central to Ibn Khaldun's theory (Giese 2011: 53–57). It denotes not only the solidarity among members of a group, but also the group itself. This group consists of tribespeople that are related by blood and belong to the same lineage. Apart from that core unit, it may include clients—meaning, in this context, affiliated members of other tribes. Supremacy over other individuals and groups is the ultimate purpose of group solidarity. It constitutes a precondition for the establishment of dynasties and the emergence of states. With the passage of time, though, some individuals from the ruling elite will claim power for themselves alone, thereby excluding some of their former brothers. As a result, the group solidarity diminishes and eventually becomes so fragile that the dynasty is overthrown and the state collapses.

For the philosopher, social scientist and anthropologist Ernest Gellner (1995: 84–85), the above model not only represents the social reality of 14th-century North Africa, but it applies to Muslim societies more generally. Its characteristics, however, have more in common with the logics of a nomadic economy than with any religious principles (Gellner 1995: 21, 31–32, 47). To improve their economic circumstances, pastoralists are inclined to raid cattle. When Islam spread to Africa and further into Asia, societies with strong nomadic traditions were soon Muslim in faith. Due to these two legacies, Muslim states are both robber states, established for the profit of an elite group, and moralistic states, as Gellner believes. To be clear about one thing: the tribe endows the city with a government, but, at the same time, it keeps the state weak, because a new attack from the desert with devastating consequences is inevitable (Gellner 1995: 80).¹⁰

Yet to what extent may Ibn Khaldun's model be helpful in the analysis of contemporary society? Even the most reckless nomads do not pose a real threat to a modern state anymore. Ernest Gellner gives the following answer:

So, instead, society is ruled by networks, quasi-tribes, alliances forged on the basis of kin, services exchanged, common regional origin, common institutional experience, but still, in general, based on personal trust, well founded or not,

¹⁰ Obviously, the state described by Ibn Khaldun is not a democracy, as the city dwellers are entirely at the mercy of their ruler (Gellner, 1995: 18–19).

rather than on formal relations in a defined bureaucratic structure. (Gellner 1994: 27)

Clientelism imbues the structures of Muslim polities (Gellner 1994: 26). As a result, the state is reduced to an “institution, which prevents injustice other than such as it commits itself” (Gellner 1994: 28).

Being used as an anthropologist to regard other cultures in their particularity, I feel somewhat uncomfortable with the more general validity of the Khaldunian model claimed by Gellner. However, there are several aspects from the work of Ibn Khaldun (2011: 155–157, 179, 205) that conform to my own observations in Uzbekistan to a considerable degree. Clientelistic relations, for instance, are often considered a form of ritual kinship. Likewise, people’s agency reveals a competitive spirit and the notion of volatility is quite prevalent. Informants’ accounts of generational decline almost echo Ibn Khaldun when he writes about the reputation of lineages having a creator who is followed by a successor, an imitator and a destroyer. Most important for my argument, however, is the existence of clientelistic structures that undermine the state.

For a better analysis of clientelism in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, one is well advised to consider the more recent history as well. In her book, “Russia’s Economy of Favours”, Alena Ledeneva (1998) describes the phenomenon of *blat*, a system of informal contacts and personal networks used to obtain goods and services in limited supply. In her estimation, *blat* is a reaction to the severe limitations of the socialist distribution system (Ledeneva 1998: 3, 87). She differentiates three dimensions of *blat*—the regimes of equivalence, affection and status (Ledeneva 1998: 142–152). While *blat* relations of affection are to be found in networks of relatives and friends, *blat* relations of status can take the form of patron-client relationships. It would not be overly surprising if the Soviet experience left an imprint on interaction in the informal sphere of present-day Uzbekistan. To a certain degree, Soviet history may also explain the issue of volatility in the civil service. To prevent the expansion of informal networks, the Soviet leadership frequently had bureaucratic personnel shifted (Fainsod 1963: 418–419). Additionally, administrators who did not accommodate the demand for rapid industrial growth would lose their position eventually.

Wherever the origins of the phenomenon might be found, two claims can be made. First, state and society in Uzbekistan are apparently not completely differentiated. Moreover, the state is undermined and preyed upon by clientelistic networks. Even though many

analytical papers are concerned with the interplay between the state and clientelism, the process of differentiation has not been paid the attention it deserves.

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